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SNOW RUBIES

SNOW RUBIES

BY

‘GANPAT’

(M. L. A. GOMPERTZ)

Author of ‘Harilek’ and ‘Stella Nash’



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TO
FRANK
AND
DOG BILL

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CHAPTER I

THE LURE

‘BILL DOG, you evil fellow! why don’t you do something useful for your living? You lead an idle-rich life, expecting your dinner unfailingly every night, and never do a hand’s turn of work to earn it.’

Frank Weston tickled Dog Bill’s ribs with his shoeless foot, temporarily removed from the top of the fireplace — his pumps lay on the floor beside him — and Bill, realising that the remark was intended for him, rolled sleepily over and half opened his eyes, where he lay by the fender in the comfortable drowsy warmth of the fire, for the night was cold as a January night in the Punjab can be. There had been rain, snow on the Murree hills to the eastward, and the air was raw and damp outside the Westons’ bungalow in Pindi.

‘Why *should* you be useful, Bill? You bite him if he teases you. Little dogs like you are made to amuse people, not to be merely utilitarian.’

Thus Miss Weston from the settee, where she was curled up with a book, a slim little figure in a rose frock.

‘Catch a mouse, Bill!’ said I encouragingly from the other end of the settee, scratching the settee leg. ‘Catch a mouse!’

Bill jumped to his feet excitedly at the old draw that never fails, and sniffed round the settee, the very

picture of a well-bred, rough-haired fox terrier, eyes alight, and head on one side in the intervals of seeking for the non-existent rodent.

'Bill will never catch a mouse any more than he would a bird,' put in Frank from the depths of his armchair at the opposite corner of the fireplace as he slowly refilled his pipe. 'He chased one for ten minutes to-night in my bathroom, and finally I had to lay it out with a towel before he could get it.'

'Anyway, he gets more fun out of the anticipation than any of us do out of the realisation,' remarked his sister. 'I think his daily hope is to catch a bird. Probably he dreams about the wild thrill that a mouthful of feathers would bring.'

'Talking of the joys of anticipation,' said I, 'what about leave this year, people? Are we going to Kashmir, or what are we going to do? What about that trek into the blue that Frank's always harping on?'

Frank sucked at his pipe for at least three minutes before answering. I never attempt to hurry him nor does his sister, who has the admirable and uncommon gift of patience in dealing with her men folk.

'Baltistan, I think,' he replied at last between puffs at his ancient pipe. 'Baltistan, and perhaps beyond. But we want long leave for it. Probably six months. Can you fix it, Jim?'

I reflected. Six months' leave meant giving up all chance of getting home for the next couple of years, anyway. But then I didn't really want to go home, for there was nothing much to draw me there. Both my parents were dead, and my brothers could get along very well without seeing me. Moreover, my sister, married to a man in my own regiment, had gone home only the previous year. A long trek into

Baltistan or anywhere else beyond the snow mountains would do me well. Long leave I certainly wanted. I was rather tired of regimental routine, the more so since my last two years had been spent in the dusty solitude of the frontier posts in the Tochi, whence my battalion had only just escaped to the more pleasant purlieus of Rawal Pindi, where I had rediscovered Frank Weston commanding a sapper field company — the same field company I had known him with in Mesopotamia some years before. Just the same old Frank — stolid and imperturbable, quick-brained behind his slow speech, straight as a die in thought and word and action, beloved of his company as of old, a slightly stiff arm from an Arab bullet in 1920, and a nasty jagged tear over the right eyebrow from a shell splinter at Loos.

Since I last met him he had added to his household two items in the shape of, firstly, Dog Bill, and secondly, his sister Valerie, who had only arrived in India in the preceding spring, but who came back there as a princess in her own right, since I remember her before the war as a flapper riding her father's chargers on the Mall at Pindi when the old man was commanding the Pindi Division. She rides now as she rode then, sixteen annas always, a slip of a girl on a large horse, very frank grey-green eyes and unruly brown hair, afraid of nothing on the earth from choleric generals to overfed, underworked ponies.

Valerie looked at me as I pondered, and, looking at Valerie, I decided that I could very well do it. I was due for furlough, top of the roster; and what better than six months in the back of beyond with her and Frank. I knew of old that she was a tireless person, fully capable of walking either me or her brother off our legs, and one to whom camp life came

as naturally as water to a duck. There are not many women of that stamp left nowadays, though to judge from one's grandmother's reminiscences there must have been shoals of them in the India of the fifties and sixties.

'Can do, Frank,' I said. 'But what are we out for? Markhor? Ibex? Bear?'

Frank continued puffing at his pipe, looking into the fire with half-closed eyes. Valerie turned her gaze in his direction.

At last he spoke.

'I think something larger than that. Maybe a wild-goose chase, but I think there's something in it. Anyway, it's worth trying.'

He turned his head slowly, and looked across to me.

'I never told you about my find up there the year before last, before Valerie came out, did I?'

'You didn't,' I replied. 'What did you find? A very specially hidden nullah with the biggest of all heads in it?'

'I did find something like that, though I didn't get it. I spent three days after the biggest head I've ever seen. Something well up to if not over the record, I should say. I wounded him, too, worse luck. Something made my rifle throw a little high — a damaged sight, I think. But it wasn't the ibex I was thinking of: it was something else I ran into when we were following the old beast up.'

He got up slowly and went to the battered uniform case, where he keeps his more special treasures. It stood in the corner of the little recess he used as his 'office,' and not even Valerie was allowed access thereto. From it he produced a small cardboard box and returned to his chair, put his feet up again in the

vicinity of the mantelpiece, and, nursing the box, told us the following:

‘As you know, the year before last, when you couldn’t get your leave, I went off alone. I thought I’d march hard into Baltistan and see what I could get. It was not my first trip up there, and I know something about the country and about the chances of sport, and I was hopeful. I had a shikari that I’d heard of from an old gunner major, who’d made a speciality of that part of the world before the war. The man had just the happy knack of getting hold of the local fellows who really knew where the game was to be found, and between their local knowledge and his shikar skill, he showed me no end in the short time I was there. This biggest head we ran into just a week before the latest date I could leave. I couldn’t get near him for two days, but on the third I managed to get close enough to risk a shot. As I said, I fired too high, and off he went. Of course we followed all we knew, sometimes by view, sometimes by blood, sometimes by guesswork. Then we lost him altogether, and as evening was coming on we had to give it up. Camp was miles away and hundreds of feet down, for we were well up on the bare rock below the snow. I sat down to have a drink and suck a pipe for five minutes before starting back. I was watching around for any sight of movement, when I noticed the old shikari looking very intently at a patch of juniper some way below us.

“‘What is it?’” I asked him.

“‘Birds, sahib,” he said. “There’s something dead or dying down there.”

‘Naturally we legged it down the slope as fast as we could go, hoping to find that the ibex had given up and been spotted by the birds before we

saw him. But when we got there it wasn't the ibex at all.'

Frank stopped in his rather tantalising way. But long years of acquaintance have taught me not to interrupt his train of thought, so I seized the opportunity to reach for a drink. I had got it mixed before he went on. Valerie was sitting there silent, and I think she knew this part of the story before. Then he continued —

'Two birds flapped off as we got there, and then we saw that what had drawn them was a man, a dead man, lying half hidden by the scrubby trees. The wretched devil was stone dead, with only bits of a ragged sort of shirt on, lying on his back with one arm across his face as though to keep off something. He hadn't been dead more than a day or so, though the birds had pecked him about a bit. I had a good look at him to see what had done him in, but I couldn't find any wound. He might, of course, have died of exhaustion or cold. But how the devil did he get there? I turned him over; my men seemed shy of touching him, and the back of his shirt gaped open in a long tear, which showed something that puzzled me a lot. All across his back were criss-cross rows of scars.

'I looked all around the place, but could see nothing else worth noting. There was no trace of a struggle of any sort, no blood trails, and the ground was too hard to show any tracks.

'The man himself was pretty dirty, but one thing struck me about him, and that was the rather remarkable pallor of such of his skin as showed under the dirt. It was not a white skin like yours and mine, for instance: it was the whiteness of things that have been long underground, or things that don't get overmuch sunlight.

‘By his features he was just the ordinary type of hillman, and might have been from any of a dozen parts of Kashmir or the neighbouring countries, strongly built, but terribly emaciated. His bones stuck out all over.

‘My shikari and the local man who was with me didn’t seem to like the look of him at all. They were chattering to each other in their own language, which I couldn’t follow, and it seemed to me that they were suffering from something not unlike fright, for while they talked sometimes they looked at the dead man, and then with scared glances at the hills beyond.

‘Although we were pretty high up, well over thirteen thousand feet, there were much higher hills beyond us covered with snow for the most part. The nullah we had been working in led up and up to a sort of horseshoe plain, with snow mountains perhaps five or six miles away, culminating in a cluster of really high peaks. I’ve got a map of that bit of the country, which I’ll show you later. It’s not too well known, being off the main track, and, barring the old gunner major who told me about it, and myself, I don’t think any other sahib has been there — at least, not for many years. Even in the villages lower down — just there we were three marches beyond the last of them — the people used to stream out to have a look at me and my camp, so they were evidently not accustomed to sahibs.

‘I couldn’t make out what the fellow had been doing there either, for it led to nowhere, and the only people who might have been up that high would have been Gujar shepherds, but I had passed most of them considerably lower down, for the year was getting on; it was middle October, and the Gujars were already working their way down to the lower

pastures. I thought perhaps he might have got left behind somehow, but that didn't seem likely, for clearly he hadn't been dead more than two days at most, and although there was frost at night, it was still warm enough in the sun. And the last lot of Gujars I'd seen was six days before.

'I asked the shikari if he could make anything of it, and he shook his head. I got rather wild with him eventually, for it seemed to me that he was playing the fool, and knew more than he wanted to say. Also he was clearly in a funk of something or other, while the local man was shivering with fright by now. The afternoon was drawing on, and there were clouds massing up behind the peaks ahead, and it looked like being a wet night, which would mean snow up there.

'We couldn't carry him down, and we had no tools to bury him with, so there was nothing to do but leave him for the moment.

'We got back to camp latish, and I tried to get some sense out of my shikari, but without much luck. He hinted something about the place being unlucky, and thought that we would not do much good there. I had my own plans, so eventually I let him go. But there was an awful lot of talk among the coolies that evening, low, hushed whispers for the greater part, round the big birch fires, which didn't last too long, for it rained and sleeted at intervals during the night.

'Next morning very early — it had cleared up a lot by then, although there were still clouds about — I sent for the shikari again, and told him we were going to have another look, taking some men to bring the body in. There was nearly a mutiny at that, and nothing I could do would persuade them to come.

Eventually I had all my work cut out to prevent them clearing out altogether and sacrificing pay and backsheesh, so I had to drop the project. I told Lal Singh, my old Sikh orderly, to come along, and I forced the shikari to come with various threats, while one of the coolies — a stouter fellow than the rest — was at last induced to accompany us by the promise of a couple of rupees, and my solemn word that we would be back long before dark. The rest of them were all complaining vigorously of the cold, of the arrival of winter, and the necessity of getting back to their villages.

‘We took a spade along with us, because I wanted to give the poor devil some sort of burial. One doesn’t like leaving any kind of a man out to be picked clean by birds and things.

‘We hadn’t got up any distance before we found the ground pretty thick with snow, although by now the sun was quite clear. It took us about three hours hard going to get to the place we’d left the body, and when we got there I had the surprise of my life.’

Again that tantalising silence while Frank meditated dreamily. I don’t think he stops intentionally, for he is not a story-teller, but he has a way of keeping you waiting like that. However, Valerie and I are accustomed to it.

‘I’d left him lying face downwards for better protection against the birds. When I got up to him now he was on his back again. Of course anything might have pulled him over — a wandering jackal or two, for instance. But it wasn’t that. Something or somebody had made an effort to straighten him out — not a successful one, for he was about frozen stiff now. And then — very weird, it seemed — there were tracks about him at the sight of which the local

man just took to his heels and fled. However, Lal Singh was after him — no Balti can really run — fetched him one across the side of the head that sent him headlong into the snow, picked him up again, and brought him back — whining with fear — by the scruff of his neck.

‘I was too busy just then looking at the tracks to notice the men much; and there was something else even more remarkable. Covered with a thin coating of snow was a little mound at the man’s head and feet, just a few rough-piled pebbles and a twig or two of juniper, with a dirty shred of cloth. As you can imagine, I stared pretty hard at those and at the tracks around. They were very shapeless in the snow, and had it not been for the little mounds I’d have put them down to a wandering bear.

‘I turned to ask the shikari if he could make anything of them, and it was clear that he was pretty frightened. The local had recovered himself a bit, thanks to Lal Singh’s handling. The Sikh’s fist was evidently considered more dangerous — anyway, in the daylight — than the other thing, whatever it was that he was afraid of. So I made them dig a hole — hard work it was in the frozen ground — so that we could bury the chap. While they were doing that under Lal Singh I followed the tracks a little way. Eventually, however, I ran into heavier snow, and lost them. Snow had been patchy, it seemed; down in camp we had had intermittent showers.

‘But just before I lost them I found something else, which I kept. I’ll show you in a minute what it is. At first I didn’t realise its importance; I grasped that later. All it did then was to show me that the tracks were human, all right, although that was pretty obvious even before, once I’d seen the little

mounds. It was a sort of rough amulet thing, and I found it in a clear space under a rock, evidently dropped by the person making the tracks, who had perhaps sheltered there from the snow during a heavy shower.

'Then I went back, and found they'd got a deep enough hole. Before we put the fellow in I had another good look at him. He was pockmarked — nothing uncommon about that, of course, in the East. Also he had rather a peculiar scar, a three-cornered tear across one cheek. Very old by the look of it; perhaps something done as a child. But it was noticeable.

'Then we started back, and we all of us had our work cut out to keep up with the local man. He was for home as fast as he could go, though I think when we'd safely reached the camp he was full of valour, telling his pals what a chicken-hearted lot they were.

'But sitting down that night with a pipe over the fire I had it out with the shikari, and got something out of him. He said the reason they were all so frightened was that they put the man's death down to snow men.'

Frank stopped again to relight his pipe, and this time Valerie put in a word.

'What are snow men?'

'It's a superstition all these people have. You know it, of course, Jim.'

I nodded assent, and he went on —

'All through the Himalayas you'll find it quite a common belief. A supposed race of men who live in the high snows. No one has ever seen them, but the natives think they find the tracks, and they're all almighty frightened of running into one of the creatures. Personally I believe the tracks are really those

of bears; in snow they look very much like a man's tracks.

'Of course, I told him he was a fool, and in the comfort of camp he looked rather sheepish over it. But there was no getting away from the fact that the local men were frightened enough. The shikari said that that particular nullah had a bad name with the Gujars, because they lost such a lot of their flocks, and occasionally a child, so that they would never go higher than they could help. Leopard probably, I expect. That I knew was true, for I'd had some difficulty in getting coolies, and the local shikari had done his best to get me to try the other side of the main valley.

'After he'd gone I sat there turning the thing over in my mind and trying to make head or tail of it. There was the dead man in a place where men ought not normally to be. Then there were the tracks and the mounds. And last, there was this amulet thing. I don't know where the tracks went to in the end, of course, but as far as I'd followed them they led up towards the higher hills, and there are certainly no villages and apparently no pass there. The more I thought about it the less I could make it out. I wondered possibly if it was some fellow who was wanted by such authorities as they have there, keeping out of the way, perhaps two of them, and the other man had come back from his hiding-place. But why by night in the snow? Of course he might have seen us the day before and been frightened. And again, why the frightened look on the dead man's face and that uplifted arm? I couldn't quite get that out of my head.

'Then the scars across his back. All sorts of theories went through my head. Escaped convicts from

Siberian mines, refugees from Bolshieland. None of them fitted in the least conclusively, and in the end I went to bed as puzzled as when I started.

‘During the night the weather broke up altogether, much to my annoyance, for I wanted to go back the next day and see if we could find out something more. I never like leaving a thing that I can’t understand. But there was no question about it next morning. The snow was coming down heavily on the hills just above, and we had to make for lower levels. Also, my leave was nearly up. As we left and I followed the coolies down the nullah, I couldn’t help looking back and wondering who and what the other person was, and how any one could live up there in the snow.

‘When we got down to the little village we’d started from I got hold of the headman and made all sorts of inquiries, but there was no record of any one being missing. None of the Gujars passing through had mentioned losing any one or any one having died. One party had been up that same nullah and lost several sheep, and sworn never to go up it again; that was all.

‘It wasn’t till I got back to India that I realised that the amulet thing might have a meaning. And that seems to me now the most important find of the whole lot.’

He opened the little box and took out something, which he passed across to me. Valerie bent forward to look at it too, although she had seen it once before.

It was the roughest kind of thing imaginable, made of dirty leather, greasy inside as though habitually worn next to the skin. The fastenings were coarse hide thongs, and the whole was embroidered — if one can use such a word of crude stitches that

might have been made by children — in colourless dirty thread. It was squarish, with, in the centre, a large dull red stone or piece of red glass, irregular in shape.

The embroidery seemed quite meaningless. There was something that might have been an attempt at an animal's head, another design that might have been a rough representation of a snake.

I passed it back to Valerie, who studied it in silence. It didn't seem to me to have any value at all. I'd seen lots of amulets of all sorts worn by all types of peoples — from the nice smart leather ones, enclosing verses from the Quran, which the Punjabi Muhammedan likes to sport on his upper arm, to the funny little silver ones that often form the only garment of tiny Hindu children. I said so to Frank, watching us through half-closed eyes above the smoke of his pipe.

'That was my opinion, too,' he replied at last, looking at Valerie fingering the leather. 'But last year I ran into Saunders — you remember he used to be my subaltern in Mesopotamia. He got demobbed at the end of '20, and took on with some South India mining company.'

I remembered Saunders well enough, Bob Saunders — more commonly known as 'Long' Saunders, to distinguish him from a squat edition of the name in the same corps. He had been some kind of a mining expert in South America before the war broke out, and thrown it over to come home and enlist in the H.A.C. The powers that be had eventually realised that his peculiar talents were wasted shouldering a rifle, and planted him in an engineer field company, where he had done remarkably well. Later he had come to India, and thence to Mesopotamia, where, as the

result of severe casualties in Frank's company, he had been transferred there, and there he remained till the end of the war.

'What's Saunders got to do with it?' I asked. 'Is he an expert in Central Asian amulets? I don't know many things he isn't expert in, but I didn't know that amulets were in his line.'

'No. He's never seen Central Asia. But he's pretty knowledgeable about other things, and he got quite excited over this.'

'How?' asked Valerie, looking up from the amulet.

'Well, according to him, that bit of red-glass looking stuff in the middle is a particularly fine ruby. He said if it was properly cut it would be worth no end of money. He couldn't stop asking about it, where I'd got it from, were there any more to be got, etc., etc.'

Valerie and I sat up then, as you can imagine. As a bit of glass it was nothing, but as a ruby — well, there was no getting away from the thing. It was three times as big as any precious stone I'd ever seen. Our excitement infected Dog Bill, who woke up again and nuzzled at Valerie's lap, smelt the amulet, and turned away with disgust to stretch one leg and then another.

'You funny little thing, Bill,' said Valerie, bending down to stroke him. 'Rubies aren't in your line, are they? You prefer mice.'

But Bill, having recently had his leg pulled on that subject, was disdainful, and stalked statelily to the opposite corner of the room to curl himself up on his blanket. We returned to the amulet and Saunders.

'Go on, Frank,' said Valerie. 'What next?'

'That's all, except that it makes the whole thing still more inexplicable. Now I could imagine some

one killing the fellow to get the amulet if they knew what it really was. But the person who dropped that had evidently come back to do what he could for the poor devil. You'd hardly come out in a snowstorm to lay out the corpse of a fellow you'd killed over a ruby. No; that didn't fit.'

Frank relapsed into silence again, but this time both Valerie and I could see that his mind was working on something, and we waited until he began again.

'There are still sapphires in Kashmir. There used to be rather a big trade in precious stones that way, you know. Any reason why there shouldn't be other mines? Lost ones, perhaps. I read up a lot, and there are none recorded up where I was.'

'You mean that perhaps this fellow had found some old workings, and he and his pal were working them alone?'

'Yes; I thought that at first. But if they were doing that, why make up this kind of thing?' He took the amulet from Valerie. 'I should say — I should say,' he went on slowly, 'that the person who made up that had no idea of the commercial value of the stone. That doesn't quite fit in with the idea of some one who had stumbled on an old mine and was working it secretly. No. There's something else we haven't hit on.'

'And I want to find out,' he continued. 'I hate unsolved riddles. And if there is anything there I'd like to get it. I could do with a fortune. Something about ten thousand a year would do us nicely; wouldn't it, Valerie?'

'It would, Frank. We could really travel then.'

I think that to travel is Valerie's great idea. She is one of the few people I know who honestly do not care a bean for the luxury of modern life. Women

who can make themselves perfectly at home in a forty-pound tent in the middle of nowhere, and take their whole kit in a suitcase that you can carry in one hand, don't care for luxury. They belong to a far older, more primitive school, direct throwbacks to the nomads who swept right across Asia and Europe in the dawn of the ages, the women whose husbands and brothers collected all of the earth that was worth having at the beginning of history. I can imagine Valerie starting for the Golden Journey to Samarcand with Flecker's pilgrims, her luggage in a bundle tied to the peak of a camel saddle, while the other women stand at the gate murmuring about the departing men to the watchman —

'They have their dreams and do not think of us.'

However, that is by the way, but as Frank and I belong to the same school it is fortunate. Otherwise we should never have gone to Baltistan, and then this story would never have been written. The idea of dumping Valerie somewhere and going off would never have entered into Frank's head. And if Valerie hadn't been made as she is, it would have meant that or not going. I can picture the face of the ordinary girl in India if her sole male belonging said, 'Let's go to Baltistan instead of Gulmarg, where there are dances thrice weekly *and* a golf course.'

So before we went to bed that night it was settled that April should see us on the road, the long road into the hills somewhere away beyond the snow-topped mountains that form a gateless barrier for most of the world. We told Dog Bill about it, but he didn't take it in properly, I'm afraid.

CHAPTER II

ARCADIA

THE dust and haze of India of the beginning of the hot weather lay over a hundred miles behind us as one morning at the end of April, having left Pindi the day before, we slid the car out of the compound of Uri dak bungalow, where we had spent the night, on to the Jhelum Valley road between hillsides fragrant with the breath of pine under a cloudless sky of blue, clear distances of snow-topped peaks and dim haziness of nearer valleys, with, below the road in a great rock gorge, the hurrying waters of Jhelum River, dotted here and there with the great logs floating down from Kashmir.

I wonder why it is that certain spots call more strongly to us than any other, and why so often they are not the particular little places where we have been born and bred or brought up. I think Kipling caught the idea when he penned those lines about Sussex: —

‘God gave to men all earth to love,
But since our hearts are small,
Ordained for each one spot should prove
Beloved over all.’

I think that for me were ordained the lands about the Jhelum, the pine-clad hills, the mysterious valleys, the far snow peaks, for they have called to me ever since the very first moment I ever saw them. Others may talk of the Ootie downs, of the Wynberg highlands, of the Swiss uplands, or of the laughing, sunlit southern isles fringed by the foam-flecked tide-

less sea, but for me there is no charm in all the world like that of the wide spaces and the tumbled hills that lie about Jhelum Valley.

Valerie and I, with Dog Bill, occupied the back seat of the car which Frank was driving, and I think she was really drunk with the wonderful beauty of the scene and the marvellous colouring, for she is an artist and a poet of the kind which doesn't paint pictures or write poetry. She sees poems in everything around her, sort of breathes them, and I sometimes think that that is the way to get the most out of poetry or beauty in any form.

'In a little while we'll be in the valley that opens on to the delectable land,' said I, 'and then in two hours you'll be in the nearest thing to Fairyland in all the world, person.'

I call Valerie that sometimes, the abbreviated remnant of a childish title of 'small person.' I think either Frank or I, at a pinch, could pick her up with one hand, and yet the girl is quite capable of outlasting either of us over a long trek or a stiff climb.

She turned at my remark from where she was leaning out — studying a particularly beautiful corner of the river — her eyes all dreamy.

'And whether we find the rubies or not, we shall find sunsets better than any rubies and all the silver and sapphire of moonlit skies; and, oh, Jim! I'm glad I'm alive, aren't you?'

A question that one might take either way and give the same answer in both cases, and really a question that needed — and got — no answer.

'I wonder if Fateh Khan and Taj Muhammad duly arrived at Mary's boat,' said Valerie a little later.

The two men named were Frank's and my serv-

ants, whom we had sent on ahead with the heavy kit. We were stopping ten days or so in Srinagar to fit out, and a great friend of the Westons — Mary Duncan, who was spending the summer in Kashmir — was putting us up in her house-boat, having got a smaller one moored alongside for Frank and me to sleep in, since her boat had not rooms enough for us all.

‘I expect so; they’re both pretty sensible lads,’ said I as I hung on to Bill, who was going perfectly mad at the insulting existence of two pariah dogs in the little village we were passing through, who had dared to bark at him.

Taj Muhammad is Frank’s man, young, fat, and of cheerful aspect. Most Indians are good in camp, but Taj Muhammad is perhaps even better than the general run. Fateh Khan, on the other hand, is a rather lean and cadaverous Punjabi Musalman — wiry beyond conception — who, after being my runner, orderly, and batman during the war, had finally given up soldiering to become my personal servant, a man of much shrewd common sense and the stoutest of hearts, as I first realised when I found him taking charge of the remnants of his section in a rather sticky mess-up in 1914.

We had another ex-soldier with us also in the shape of the Sikh, Lal Singh, who had been in Frank’s sapper field company during the war, and who was with him on his trip to Baltistan. A well-trained sapper is a treasure about a camp, and Lal Singh was very much of a handy-man in most ways. He was following us with our tents, which had been late in getting off from Pindi.

We were still talking of Mary Duncan and the arrangements she had made for us, when suddenly I

stopped and pointed ahead. In front of us were no longer new shoulders of new-seen hills, such as we had been seeing mile after mile along our winding road, but an ever-widening rift, with far away on the horizon the great snow mountains of the farther wall of Kashmir, while to our left, in place of the rushing, boiling torrent we had grown familiar with these last hundred miles, was a slow, wide river with little fishermen's boats on its placid surface, and willow-shaded villages set in orchards gay with fruit blossom along its banks.

'Welcome to Fairyland, person,' said I. 'It was worth coming for, wasn't it?'

And so at last we drove into Arcadia, up a long, poplar-shaded road, until suddenly, all unaware, we came back on to the river again, but this time a river packed with boats — house-boats like English house-boats — great timber barges, matted dungas, long boats packed with sheep and cattle, and on either side of the river, as far as one could see, the huddled mass of houses — carved wooden houses with crazy pile understructures — pink and blue plaster buildings, and a vista of wooden bridges spanning the stream between the flat-roofed iris-decked houses and the golden-domed temples.

We turned into a street thronged with loose-robed Kashmiris, skull-capped, burly Musalman peasantry, grave, turbaned Dogras, laughing, chattering Kashmiri women in loose smock-like gowns, with hair spread into a dozen plaits, whose ends were twisted into cotton ropes, making a network across their backs, and passed over the first bridge — a modern girder structure — into the European quarter of Srinagar, city of the waters, capital of Kashmir, which is another name for Fairyland.

As we turned on to the bridge we caught sight of Fateh Khan waiting to show us where Mrs. Duncan's boat lay. He climbed on to the running board, and, hanging there, guided us, more or less, through the rabbit warren of the Dal gate bazaar, through tortuous streets packed with small children, who ran alongside demanding 'backsheesh,' until in the end we came out at Gaggribal point, the rocky snout of the Takht-i-Suleiman, the sacred hill of Srinagar.

Here again house-boats a many, tucked into the willows, with, in front of us, all the wonderful sweep of the great Dal lake, turquoise water fringed with rushes, and the last traces of snow still on the mountains, which rose up sheer on the farther side under the cloudless sky. And among the boats, in a secluded nook, lay Mrs. Duncan's craft, the *Shamrock*, and waiting to greet us in the doorway, under the shade of the rustling willow fronds, stood Mary Duncan herself in blue cotton Kashmir frock, with the blue of the Kashmir waters in her eyes.

'Welcome to Arcadia, people,' said she as she led Valerie in and showed Frank and me the matted dunga she had got for our sleeping quarters, where Taj Muhammad stood beaming all over. And the Arcadians we became for the rest of the time we spent there, since, according to Mary Duncan, an Arcadian was a person who did nothing in particular, and did it very well; and certainly the label fitted us admirably, especially Frank and me, who, after two or three years of over-strenuous toil, were quite ready to laze.

Our days were spent — except for such short hours as were absolutely necessary for the purchasing of stores and various necessities of travel in the different shops about the river front — in long, lazy pic-

tics to the various beauty spots about Srinagar, more particularly to the Moghul gardens. The Moghul emperors are but a memory now, but one thing will mark for all time the days when they held almost all that we hold of India — and Afghanistan to boot — and that is the dream gardens they planted wherever they went. For a race of cheery, swashbuckling, daredevil adventurers, they seem to have had a most wonderful eye for natural beauty, and nowhere perhaps did they show it so much as in the various gardens they planted round about Srinagar.

One such picnic I remember peculiarly well. It was to the Nishat Bagh, the garden made by the Emperor Jehangir, whither we went in shikaras on one specially beautiful day when the Dal lake seemed even more lovely than usual, with the still water throwing back the mirrored picture of the hills around. All about us the banks were brilliant with the yellow of the mustard fields, and splashed here and there with the pink and white of orchards, while at one corner stood a little village strangely English, with its wooden houses in this continent of mud buildings.

We passed quaint little market boats like prehistoric dug-out canoes — almost awash with their heavy loads of vegetables — propelled by aged men or wrinkled-faced old women, who squatted in the bows, only an inch or so above the water, plying their spade-like paddles as they urged their clumsy craft along like so many one-legged water-beetles. Valerie, who is a voracious reader and a person of considerable literary knowledge, was propped up against the gaudy cushions with a book of the Georgian poets; while I was lazily lying full length, tasting the joys of Arcadia once more, listening to the well-remembered cries of our paddlers chanting in a rhythmical jingle the

names of their patron saints, or of the riverside towns, as they swung their paddles in great, long strokes with the slow pause between, making the light shikara leap forward, quiver, and check again, so that almost one seemed to be carried along by some great water beast.

We left the shikaras, and walked up the slight rise to the Nishat Bagh. On that spring morning, with its lawns of velvet green, its long avenues of chenar in spring leaf, the mauve of lilac vying with the wonder of the fruit blossom all about the long line of waterfalls and fountains, and the great overhanging wall of mountain forming a savage background just behind the quaint-ordered flowerbeds, the Nishat was a dream garden if ever there was one.

We spread our rugs and ate our lunch on a terrace under the great chenar trees at the top end — a terrace built up with a red wall of old Moghul brick and marble water-slides, with little niches for coloured lamps, over which the water could fall in a crystal wall on gala nights. And then we lay there looking at the sky through the green network of the chenar leaves, and quoting everything that came into our heads.

“Ah, moon of my delight that knows no wane,
The moon of heaven is rising once again.
How oft hereafter rising shall she seek
Through this same garden and for us in vain?”

quoted Mary. ‘Can’t you see it? The moon looking through the chenar leaves, and all the shadows like hands upon the grass. The chenar leaf is just like an open hand.’

‘But Khayyam wasn’t there,’ put in Frank, with the passion for accuracy that overcomes him now

and then. He is a great philatelist, and I suppose long poring over stamps with a magnifying-glass leads to minute accuracy. His Stanley Gibbons's catalogue is to him what a bed-book of poetry is to other people. It is the last thing he reads at night, and it is propped against his glass of a morning while he is shaving.

'No. But the chenar came from Persia. Nur Jahan brought it to Kashmir,' replied Mary; 'and I think she brought the rose too.'

Somehow her mention of roses brought Flecker to my mind, and I quoted the 'Golden Journey': —

"Men say there blows,
In stony deserts, still a rose,
But with no scarlet to her leaf —
And from whose heart no perfume flows."

I wonder if that is to be found beyond Baltistan?

'I don't know,' said Valerie, 'but anyway —

"We travel not for trafficking alone,
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned,
For lust of knowing what should not be known,
We make the golden journey to Samarcand."

'Skardu — or thereabouts,' corrected Frank, mentioning the general line of our route, which beyond that comparative metropolis lay out into the blue, known only to Frank and the gods.

'Doesn't rhyme,' objected Valerie. 'But we are certainly going the long road, and maybe it's for lust of knowing what should not be known. Oh, I do wonder what we'll find.'

'Romance for sure,' said Mary Duncan. 'That is always to be found by those who are brave enough to seek.' She sat propped against the satiny bole of a chenar tree, hands clasped behind her head, blue eyes adream under the blue of her soft hat as she gazed

out on the snow-barred mountains. 'The romance that lies in your destiny.'

She makes you think, does Mary Duncan, the most delightful woman of the world one could meet — good to look upon, good to listen to, *bonne camarade* if ever there was one. She can talk intelligently on anything; she can quote from author after author; she can manage a house as efficiently and far more pleasantly than any heroine of a mid-Victorian novel, and certain illustrated papers pay her large sums for her articles.

And if you know — as we did — that those slim capable hands can hold an express rifle as straight as a man's — her house has several skins of tigers of her own slaying — and that those quiet blue eyes had faced a frenzied mob in the post-war year, when the sedition-monger sent out word that the day of the British was over, and all that remained was to loot and rape and kill — eyes that probably had more to do with checking that mob than the loaded weapon in her hands — well, you wonder all the more at the marvel of her.

Like Valerie, Mary Duncan is a reminder to the might-be cynical that the breed of '57, the women who faced the siege of Lucknow, or still earlier, the horrors of the Kabul retreat, is not yet dead, so closely do both of them in their different ways bear the stamp of the old-time Anglo-Saxon women who first faced the perils of the seas, who pushed across America from East to West in the great pioneer days, the women who alone made it possible for our race to take and hold what we have taken and held, the greater half of a world.

On our way back across the lake I pondered over that saying of Mary's about the romance that lies in

one's destiny as I do over so many of her sayings, for she has the gift of catching your mind with a word. Lost rubies, the high valleys, snow mountains, mystery, and enchantment. What better surrounding in which to find romance? And the long road opened before me, the flowered margs, the snow of the passes, the bare rock slopes, the rushing waters of the upper Indus levels, and somewhere beyond them all Frank's horseshoe valley with the snow peaks and a dead man. I pictured it to myself: Frank standing there in the white sunlight on the gleaming snow, all about him the queer tracks; Lal Singh — matter-of-fact as ever — leaning on his rifle with the Balti cringing near him — Frank and Lal Singh in shorts and putties and boots, the shikari and the Balti in the usual grass shoes.

And then the picture changed, and we were all three of us there, Frank and Valerie and I, with Lal Singh and several others half seen near by. But now there was no dead man, only dirty trodden snow, with ominous red patches and a maze of footprints. And somehow the cloudless sky was low and threatening, the sunlight cold, and the great snow peaks seemed to overhang us, cruel and menacing.

Then they were all gone, and I was in black darkness, thick, heavy, clinging darkness, though I could feel Valerie close behind me and hear Frank, a little in front, treading cautiously, while somewhere in the gloom ahead was a wavering red light, dim, half-heard noises, and a foetid smell.

And then I suppose my lunch lay heavy upon my chest, for out of the shadows something leapt up, something that seemed only half human and wholly vile, that grappled with me — tooth and talon-like hands that sought my throat.

'You'll upset the shikara if you don't lie still,' said Valerie's voice, and I woke up to the present again with the translucent blue of the lake about us, and all the mountains rose-coloured in the evening light.

'Have I been asleep?' I sat up and looked around.

'Fast asleep like Dog Bill. Anyway, you missed the one unpleasant thing we've struck to-day in the shape of a shikara of rotten vegetables that's just passed.'

'I suppose that's what I smelt,' said I as I told her my dream.

'Dog Bill was growling hard, too,' was all she remarked, looking at me curiously and putting down the book she may have been reading.

When we got back to the *Shamrock* we found Frank, who with Mary had raced us in their shikara, engaged with a newcomer, whose little shikara lay alongside in charge of another man. The newcomer was a small but sturdily built man with a reddish brown beard and very steady hazel eyes with curious brown markings in them. By his thick puttoo clothing and heavily nailed chaplis, the coarse putties, and the leather wallet of chits, I gathered that he was a shikari, and as we pulled alongside, I caught his name, and so knew him to be Frank's old shikari, Rassula, whom we had been expecting — a man who had marched thousands of miles with sahibs in search of big game among the mountains of Astor, Ladakh, and Baltistan, and one who knew the high hills as the London bobby knows Piccadilly. He had not been with Frank on the previous occasion, having gone on a long trip into Kishtwar.

'Baltistan?' I heard him question as I helped Valerie on board, a thing she rather dislikes, being of an independent nature. 'Baltistan and the high hills?

Three weeks' march; and then a valley beyond Skardu? I think I know that valley, though never have I heard of sahibs going there. And this sahib comes, too?' He indicated me.

'Yes, he comes, and another sahib. Also my sister, Miss Sahib.'

'It is not a road for memsahibs,' said Rassula, who hadn't seen Valerie on a hill path. 'But since she is the sahib's sister, maybe' — even then he said it doubtfully, though with a shade more hope — 'maybe she will do the marches — with a pony,' he added as an afterthought.

Then, pointing out the man in the shikara, he explained that it was his sister's son who would come with us as second string.

'Karima is young and sometimes foolish, but I have taught him much, and he will be better than any stranger. And where is the other sahib?'

'He comes next week,' replied Frank. The other member of our party was Saunders, the mining expert to whom Frank had shown the amulet. He had had infinite trouble over getting leave, but his contract with the mining company in South India included a term of leave which was already overdue, so in the end his directors had given way, and he was to join us shortly. Frank was in terror lest he should bring up what Frank described as a 'useless down-country ape of a servant, who'll die if we take him up over six thousand feet.'

'And when do we start?' asked Rassula finally.

'From Gandarbal, in a week's time, by the Sind Valley,' replied Frank. 'We'll send you ahead to get the ponies.'

'Good! Then now I will go into the bazaar and buy food, for we have but this afternoon arrived

from Gandarbal, and we have little with us. I see Lal Singh has come. For an Indian he climbs well, and does not make a noise like a motor gharri when game is in view.'

And with this 'praise with faint damns,' as the babu puts it, Rassula climbed back into his shikara, and we watched her slide away into deep water, and so round the corner of the willows to vanish in the direction of Srinagar.

'Rassula's a good fellow,' said Frank as we watched them go. 'He's got pluck, which is a thing the Lord left out when He made the Kashmiri.'

The next three days were spent in a final overhaul of kit and in making the last purchases for the road, days rather more busy than those that had preceded them, but at last everything was more or less ready. Saunders was due the following morning, and two days later we were to start.

We were sitting over dinner considering the rows of packed yakhdans stacked against the carved wooden walls of the *Shamrock*.

'Why is making the bundobust for a trek almost the nicest part of the whole show?' I queried as I folded up the map, with whose aid we had been explaining our route to Mary Duncan.

'Anticipation,' replied Valerie. 'Looking forward to a thing is half the fun of it. It's like the bird that Bill always hopes he'll catch, but never does.'

I think there is a good deal of truth in that remark; anyway, with regard to holiday expeditions. The joyous days of plotting routes, of poring over maps, of getting together camp kit, the smell of tents, the old souvenirs which lurk in battered gun-cases, and sweep out over you as you open them to go tenderly over the oily barrels and the polished stocks.

Anticipation, and also memories of very cherished days. That dint on the stock where you banged it against a rock when you were after the wounded leopard, whose head grins down now from over the fireplace at home. That cunningly let-in piece of Kashmir walnut which old Amira at Srinagar put in the Rigby's butt where it had been chipped when your gun-porter was swept off his feet by a sudden spate in a mountain torrent.

One is so apt to remember the painful bits of life that it is good to keep about you the servants who have contributed the flowery portions, the faithful servants who are always ready and never intrude, who never ask for more pay or grumble at the food, the old guns and rifles and hog-spears, the worn saddles, the battered Rurki chair that is still redolent of the birch fires below the glaciers, the shabby poshtin that was eider-down by night, dressing-gown at dawn, greatest comfort of the cold misty evenings under the birches of the high levels. I sometimes think that they are the amulets against old age and melancholy, and where other men contemplate furnishing houses from Liberty or Waring and Gillow, my dream is to get a tiny place and fill it with all my own particular camp treasures. But only when I'm old or crocked and can march no more.

My mind ran off on that strain after Valerie's remark, and she watched me. The other two had their heads together over some photos of Mary's.

'Elixir of youth, Valerie,' said I; 'isn't it? All the things you've taken to the specially delectable places.'

'What's an elixir of youth?' asked Mary, who had caught the remark. So I had to explain, and that sent Frank off on his dream of the place he would have when he was old and out of it all. It was going

to have one room fitted entirely with all the nice things he had found in the East — few but good — very good. Carved furniture of Kashmir, really choice rugs, heads approaching the records, each with its own personal story. But with Frank it was the things he had brought from the delectable places rather than those he had taken there that he would keep by him.

That night, it being warmer than usual, we went up on the flat roof at the forward end of the boat, and lay on cushions — at least, Frank and I did, — sucking pipes and gazing at the stars; while the girls, a shade, only a shade, less recumbent than ourselves, listened to Frank's discourses on the stars. He waxed positively fluent on the subject without any pauses even, and he made the stars friendly, living creatures for us, each with its own peculiar characteristics and identity.

Then, later, Mary — writer and dreamer — began to hum snatches of song, which we simply had to take up, and over the silent waters went drifting the old, old airs that one never tires of. And by degrees our minds and memories woke up, and each and all came out with their favourite bits, random quotations from this poet and that, all the treasures which lie in the locked cupboards where the subconscious mind — *pace* Freud — stores up the delectable souvenirs of the delectable places and moments.

And then up over the hazy mountains came the moon, throwing long bars of broken silver across the dark waters, putting to flight the golden glitter of the stars that had hitherto been coyly peeping at themselves in the mirrored surface of the lake.

“Oh, spiritual pilgrim rise;
The night has grown her single horn . . .”

I quoted. Flecker seemed to suit the occasion, but then he suits most occasions. And Valerie chimed in with the next lines:

“The voices of the souls unborn,
Are half adream with Paradise.”

We may not have been souls unborn, but all of us were certainly more than half adream with Paradise.

‘Listen to them!’ said Mary. ‘Twin souls!’ And then the silence came down again as we watched the moon swing out over the waters like a fairy boat putting out into a fairy sea, spellbound by the wonderful miracle of the silver light on the rippling surface, and then by the first sheen of it on the snows, all a misty radiance against the silvered sky.

I turned to Valerie, indicating the new-seen snow as I said softly — Frank was pointing out a new star to Mary —

“We are the pilgrims, Master, we shall go
Always a little farther: it may be
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow.”

‘We may be looking for rubies, but it *is* going to be a golden journey,’ she answered. And I thought so too, even if we weren’t heading for Samarcand.

CHAPTER III

WE TAKE THE ROAD

THREE days later saw us at Gandarbal, the end of the navigable portion of the Sind River, camped on a flat meadow above the bridge, watching the boat in which we had come from Srinagar starting on her journey back. We had come by water instead of marching, since it was a pleasant, lazy way of doing it, and there was marching enough ahead of us. Our little camp looked attractive with the background of great hills, all snow-topped, and the rushing ice-water foaming down just in front of the stretch of turf whereon we had been having tea.

‘Arcadia was a good spot,’ said Frank; ‘but I’m glad to be on the move now. I wanted that rest. I think we all did; but it’s good to be on the road.’

‘I could have done with several weeks more of Arcadia, seeing that I only got a bare two days,’ put in our third man, Saunders, who had only joined us the day before we left Srinagar. ‘You scored over me in getting away early, and then the moment I arrive you rush me off.’

His tone was lugubrious as he pulled a yard or two of leg off the yakhdan whereon it was stretched, and tightened his shoe-lace. I was amused to see that the old gift of grouching which had been such a feature of his in the war was still alive. Only in those days it was what you might call the gift of inverted grouching. The worse things got, the less he grumbled. In a comfortable billet he would grouse all day, but up in the sketchiest of trenches, with most of the so-called

parapet blown about his ears and half his section laid out, he would get positively humorous, and maintain that everything in the garden was lovely.

Undoubtedly Captain Saunders was just the man we wanted with us, and I only wished that Mary Duncan had been able to come too — she is so essentially a pilgrim soul. But as she couldn't, it was nice to have a fourth; and whether Saunders's expert knowledge came in useful or not, he promised to be good company.

Lean as they make them and wiry as a greyhound, gaunt sinewy hands, bony knees showing below the end of his neatly cut khaki shorts over the carefully chosen heather-coloured stockings, his six feet three of spare figure was meticulously cared for from his carefully parted jet black hair to the tips of his well-made sambhur-hide shoes. He wore a khaki shooting-coat, whereas Frank and I were in shirt-sleeves, and both the coat and the shorts had the gloss of starch upon them, while the silk fawn shirt was spotless and of expensive make, that went well with the silk tie he was wearing.

He was not exactly good-looking — the face was too thin and angular, the features too pronounced; but he was certainly good to look at to any one who likes to see the real combination of mental and physical qualities that make up what you and I call a 'man' — perhaps the highest praise that the Anglo-Saxon race can bestow. The rather deep-sunk eyes of the clearest blue — put in, as the Irish say, 'with a smutty finger' — under the dark brows held a trace of laughter that belied the slightly morose expression of the shallow face, and the clean-cut mouth above the firm bony chin was a very honest one.

He had not brought the south country man that

Frank had feared, but a lean rather dark Sikh by the name of Gobind, also an ex-soldier of sorts, who had been an employee in Saunders's mine; for the Sikh, like the Pathan, will wander all over the world for money, and even Southern India is, so to speak, next door as compared to Australia or Africa.

Taj Muhammad had just finished taking away the tea-things, and Frank was covering the little camp-table with maps and instruments, deep in discussion with Saunders on technical details of levels and contours and trigonometrical points, into which discussion I periodically thrust my layman's remarks.

Valerie — knitting a pair of stockings — was listening quietly, for she makes no pretence of understanding technicalities, but, unlike many women, she can listen to them tactfully by the hour. She is essentially a motherly person, and will extend the same indulgent gracious hearing to her grown menkind talking shop as do other women to their own children talking nonsense.

Presently the talk turned on the route we were to follow, and Frank plotted it out for us. He evidently knew the stages by heart, as one does on a wild road that one has traversed even if only once.

'And where do we make for at the end of that?' asked Saunders.

Frank pointed out the great cluster of hills on the map which we three had studied so often, and Valerie and I bent over the table to see. There was an ever-new fascination in looking at the great peaks marked so baldly on the map — contours and water-courses that meant such very different things to us and to the surveyor who had made it.

'It looks devilish high country,' remarked Saunders, as he ran over the contours with the point of a

pencil. 'I don't quite see where your plain comes in.'

'No,' replied Frank. 'It doesn't. That bit there isn't accurate, and I should say that it was sketched in from below, and probably from a distance. Some way off it looks just like the map shows, and I never thought there'd be a depression like the one I found. But in the centre of all those peaks — twenty thousand feet, most of them — there's a big plain several miles in extent. I can't think why it hasn't turned into a lake from all the melting snow.'

'Probably some natural fault that drains it off,' put in Saunders. 'I've seen something like that before.'

'Well, it was on the surrounding ridge that I found my man. The local fellow I had swore that no one lived there — in fact, no one had ever been up that high; and even though the villagers lower down had never crossed the pass, they must have known if there were any villages up on top. But, of course, mere statements that no one has ever climbed a mountain out here mean nothing. The Lidar Valley people still swear that no one has ever been up Mount Kolahoi, although Neve and Mason reached the summit.'

'And what are we going to do when we get into the place?' asked Saunders, carefully fitting a cigarette to a gold-and-ebonite holder — one of the patent kind of Mr. Dunhill's.

'We'll camp on the farther side of the pass. As you know, it's a treeless country, but just there is the exception that proves the rule. There's quite a nice little pine forest growing much higher than usual, well over ten thousand feet. Then we'll explore all round and see if we can find any trace of old mine

workings. In any case we ought to get some big heads, for no one ever seems to go there, and a place like that becomes a sort of game sanctuary, for the wild animal is wonderfully cunning at learning what valleys are left alone.'

'Still, you did find one man and traces of another,' remarked Valerie. 'I always wondered how any one could live there all the year round, but if there are trees and it's so much lower than the map makes out, it would be possible. According to the books which Jim insisted on my reading up, they cultivate a sort of barley in Baltistan and Thibet, which ripens as high as thirteen thousand and even fourteen thousand feet.'

'You're opening up a prospect of there being a lot of people — quite a colony. We won't find that,' said Frank. 'The days of the forgotten peoples are past now. And if there were such a village or villages, the people lower down would be bound to know, since they'd have to come down sometimes to get cloth and things of that sort. No; but we might find one or two fellows working a mine on their own, and smuggling the proceeds out by some other route — perhaps towards Chinese Turkestan. It would be too risky trying it on the Kashmir side, where the durbar is dead set against anything of that sort.'

And then we went off again on our usual theories to account for Frank's find — theories as wild and as weird as the things we really did find in the end.

Next morning Dog Bill's insistence dragged me out of bed before any one else, in time to see a row of grey-clothed figures, with coarse blankets thrown plaid-wise about them, coming across the bridge towards us, followed by a string of ponies — diminutive beasts with pack saddlery of the coarsest. At

their head was Rassula and his nephew, and the three permanent men we had engaged in addition to our cook, Ghulama.

Frank came out in his pyjamas to view the outfit, and with him emerged Saunders in marvellous sleeping attire of the kind that adorn the windows of Swan & Edgar's. Even at that hour of the morning his hair was beautifully parted.

'Which are the permanent blokes?' he asked. 'We change the ponies from stage to stage, don't we?'

'Those three in front,' indicated Frank. 'One of them is rather an odd fish, but Rassula says he's all right. I don't believe he's a Kashmiri at all — looks like a hillman from Poonch with the regular green eyes.'

The man he was speaking of stood a little apart from the others, and instead of the usual grass shoes he wore chaplis of Khattack pattern, such as you sometimes see in the Murree hills, though shoes are more common.

Rassula noticed our glances, for he spoke up, and I thought there was a shade of anxiety in his tone.

'The sahibs will take Gulab Khan?' he asked. 'He is known to me, although he has no chits. He lost them, but he has done service with sahibs.'

The man came nearer when he heard Rassula mention his name, and I looked at him again. He was a biggish man for a hill Punjabi, who are generally slighter made than the plainsmen. He held himself well, too, and I wondered if he had ever been drilled. But had he been a soldier he would surely have mentioned the fact. There is a clannish feeling about the army in India, where arms are still an honourable and honoured profession, in spite of all the Western notions that the ignorant from home endeavour to dis-

seminate among the almost equally ignorant peasantry of India.

‘Have you known him long?’ I asked Rassula.

‘I met him last year with a sahib out beyond Leh. He is always marching. They know him in the villages, where they call him “the wayfarer,” and also say that he is a little afflicted of Allah; but of that I am not sure. I think he seeks something or some one.’ Rassula had dropped his voice a little.

‘That explains a lot,’ remarked Frank. ‘A reputed madman can go anywhere and never starve. He doesn’t look dotty, though. I should say he had all his wits about him.’

Saunders and I agreed, and Gulab duly came with us, and, far from being mad, he seemed to be extremely sane and level-headed, and most useful about camp always.

Followed four very pleasant days’ march, camping each day in a new place, the routine of the road getting stronger day by day, till camp seemed to pitch and strike itself, until at last we found ourselves among the birches of Baltal, with the great peaks about the Zoji La pass overhanging us, and the valley only just beginning to wake from its winter sleep.

It was good to swing along each day in the cool air — round shadowed corners under the trees to catch ever some new glimpse of river beauty ahead — to stand and gaze at some new-seen glimpse of snow peak; good to look at Valerie with the morning light in her eyes — eyes almost grey-blue sometimes as she gazed out at the distances; good to feel her companionship as she stepped easily at my side for all our difference of height; best of all, to know that at last we were on that long march into the unknown that we had always — half in dream and half in hope

— promised ourselves we would do together some day.

She looks dainty enough in the clothes of civilisation, but I prefer her in walking clothes with the scent of pinewoods about her, for she seems to belong there far more than she ever belongs to the myriad conventions of life as we lead it in places like Pindi or Simla or London or Little Staunton, all alike in their remoteness from the better and wilder corners of the world.

It was intensely cold the morning when we set out from Baltal somewhere about 2 A.M. for the journey over the pass — one of those wonderful, starlit, frosty nights which hardly seem dark at all, so full is the sky of stars. The great peaks hung above us in the silence, clear-cut against the jewelled sky as we plodded over the crackling frozen snow, the coolies, with their humped loads, behind us.

The first greyness of the false dawn saw us near the head of the pass — little black dots in the white waste of the snowfields — the great, white-clothed hills on either side broken here and there by the blackness of precipitous rock. There was an uncanny stillness all about, and not even a faint breeze stirred the air.

Then by degrees the view changed, and the great black-and-white masses of the hills were transformed to rose-flushed pinnacles of snow above the dark shadows, which lightened first to indigo and then to clearer blue, as, far off, peak after peak caught the sun's rays, and showed clear and sharp above the blue valleys as we began the gentle descent towards Macchoi, the actual pass now well behind us.

There was little of incident on the road other than the daily charm of ever-changing landscape — land-

scape wildly fascinating, for all that the Kashmir forest had given place to the bare rock of the Balti hills. But there was always the interest of new peoples day after day, occasional villages surrounded by willows and poplars and dotted with fruit trees — generally the only trees in all the wild, bare expanse of the jagged hills — as we followed the Dras River; and then the Suru, and so in time came to our first glimpse of the Indus, whose waters we had last seen hundreds of miles away at Attock Bridge on the edge of the Punjab. And later we came to the Shayok, an even bigger stream, though it loses its name on joining the Indus, and there we camped in view of the tremendous peaks of the Muztagh — the gigantic chain that is the border of Chinese Turkestan.

Two days we rested there before pushing on into the wilder country ahead. The precipitous hill roads, the overhanging parris carrying the track along the faces of sheer rock walls above boiling torrents — even the swaying suspension bridges — were things of the past, crude roads as they were, and in a few days now we should be high up under the snows among the glacier valleys and snow bridges near where lay Frank's nullah.

Five days' more marching took us to the main valley somewhere off which lay our route — four days up the valley before we turned westward, according to Frank — a rather desolate looking spot, redeemed slightly by a tiny village, where the apricots were just breaking into blossom.

Camp was pitched near a little stream — a side arm of the bigger one which evidently drained the great glaciers and snow ranges that blocked our view at the far end of the valley, and Valerie and I were looking at the fantastic peaks — all rose-coloured in

the evening light — when we noticed Gulab Khan, the green-eyed man, standing some little way off gazing upstream.

‘He’s a funny, taciturn sort of bird, isn’t he?’ said I, drawing her attention to the solitary figure. ‘I’ve never been able to get him to talk much, although he admits he knows this place. I rather fancy that’s why Rassula was so keen on bringing him.’

‘He looks as if he was trying to spot something,’ replied Valerie as she watched him. ‘I’ve often thought he looks like that, and I’ve noticed him before, at the end of a march or when some turn in the road has opened out a new view, sort of staring fixedly northwards. I’m not surprised that the local people say he’s afflicted of Allah, for he has a queer look in his eyes at times. But what’s he doing now?’

‘Sharpening his axe, by the look of him.’

Saunders came up behind us just at the moment.

‘That’s a mysterious rite he goes through often,’ said he, catching our words. ‘I’ve seen him at it once or twice before, always at the end of the day’s march. I inspected the thing once, and it’s got an edge like a razor. Heaven knows why he carries it, for he never uses it. When he has a cutting job to do he borrows the cook’s axe.’

We watched the man for a few moments, for he was a little way from us, and I think unaware of our presence. He whetted the axe meticulously, and tested it again and again on his hand. Then he put it down and spread out a little cloth he always carried round his waist, took off his chaplis, and began his prayers, facing to the West as a good Musalman in the East should do, since Mecca lies westward from our part of the world, though southeast from Turkey and Egypt.

But when he had finished he turned northward again, and stood there for a space, as though praying ere he picked up his axe and the cloth, slipped on his chaplis, and turned back to camp.

‘Rather a creepy proceeding, isn’t it?’ said Valerie as we watched him go.

‘He interests me,’ said Saunders. ‘I’ll get to the bottom of it some day. I’ll swear the man’s been a soldier, though he sticks to it that he was never in the army.’

I wondered a bit as we went back to the tents, for the air was getting chilly, and next day, as we made our first march up the valley, I had a good look at Gulab Khan’s weapon. It was the ordinary narrow-necked hill-axe of the Punjab — carried by half the hillmen one meets. An efficient tool for stealing wood out of forest reserves, and also for other even more illegitimate uses.

Somehow the sight of the thing brought back to my mind an unpleasant object I had once happened upon in the Himalayas. There was a blood feud toward over some woman or other, and two of the local policemen, who at the moment happened to be under my orders, were guarding the débris. Whoever had done the work had been at pains to make the deceased neither beautiful nor recognisable, for they had trimmed the man’s head of every natural projection, and the great gash at the back could have been made with no other weapon than a hill-axe. I don’t know why Gulab’s axe should have brought that incident back to my mind, but it did, as inanimate objects sometimes will start a train of memory.

For the next four days we continued up the valley under the great towering wall of ice-scored cliffs hundreds of feet above us, our path lying along the edge

of the fast-running stream fed from the great glaciers beyond, the first of which lay clear to view when we camped that night of our fourth march.

Frank pointed out our route of the morrow, a narrow nullah leading off left-handed, and, as he had said, high up it we caught a glimpse of steep mountain wall somewhere in which lay the pass into his hidden plain. The following morning saw us filing up the steep hillside of the side nullah that twisted and wound its tortuous way into the heart of the great snow-topped mountains we had first seen from the Shayok. Rassula came up just as we started, and suggested the importance of at least one of us keeping behind the coolies. We had had to give up pony transport ever since leaving the Shayok Valley.

‘They don’t like the march, sahibs,’ he explained. ‘They are doubtless foolish people of little courage, but they are afraid. I listened to them last night, for I know some of their talk, and they say no one ever goes up here. It is a bad place, one given over to *bhuts*.’ Rassula spoke with the contempt of his class for the people of the wilder hills, but I sometimes wondered whether in his heart of hearts he also hadn’t a little lingering belief in the superstitions of the high mountains.

‘And so it were well if one of the sahibs kept behind lest any drop their loads and go back.’

I offered for the post — we did not want to lose anything — and Valerie said she would go with me. Frank had to be ahead, since he alone knew the way, and he and Saunders were busily engaged in a geological discussion about the various rock formations.

We kept Fateh Khan and the younger shikari with us in case of trouble, and Dog Bill, after running backwards and forwards between the two parties as

Frank and Saunders started, decided that he would stick to us. After all, it is Valerie who inspects his dinner each night, even though Frank pays for it.

It was a long hard march for all that we were afoot at daybreak, and it was after five before we reached our camping ground, a little stretch of comparatively dry turf between the snow-beds. We had a lot of fires that night, for fuel was abundant — small stunted shrubs — and the coolies clustered about them evidently afraid to go far afield.

‘The last march to-morrow,’ said Frank, as after dinner we sat toasting our feet by the camp fire. ‘It’s a narrow pass and a good steep pull well over thirteen thousand feet. Then a drop of two thousand feet to camp.’

‘It will be pleasant to settle down a bit,’ said Valerie. ‘We’ve been going pretty hard so far.’

And thereafter silence settled down — perhaps sleepiness consequent on the long march; more likely, I think, the quiet that comes over one the evening before one starts into the unknown. However much of a wanderer you may be, there is always a little feeling of strangeness at the leaving behind of even comparatively familiar things, a feeling of slight disquiet at the setting of one’s face to the untried, and the wonder of the coming chapter is always veiled — even if only for the briefest space — by the tinge of regret at the closing of one that has become familiar. We had grown to know the road — it was something akin to other roads we knew; it stretched back to well-known places and people, but over that ridge in front lay something utterly new to all of us save Frank, and a place that we had so often filled with pictures of our own imagining.

And mingled with the vague disquiet perhaps was

the sense of our own smallness, our tiny camp a microscopic spot of yellow light under the great heights below the glowing worlds that wheeled in the sky above us, as though to correct any defects into which our sense of proportion might have fallen.

Somehow we went to bed very quietly indeed, and Valerie quoted to me as she went:

' . . . "but oh, I now depart
A little sadly, strangely, fearfully,
As one who goes to try a mystery."'

Don't you feel a bit like that to-night, Jim? I do.'

CHAPTER IV

FRANK'S NULLAH

WE had a certain amount of difficulty in getting our coolies started the next day. They dawdled over roping the loads, and chattered endlessly with Rassula, picked up their bundles, put them down again, and generally played for time after the manner of the immemorial East when it is being made to do something against its will. They protested most volubly that there was no road, that once at the top of the nullah we should only find more hills in front and no place to camp, that no one had ever camped there before, that there was no shikar, that loads could not be got up, and so forth and so on.

Frank got really sharp with them in the end, and when he does get riled, people begin to move rather hurriedly, and the Baltis were no exception to this general rule, which I have observed elsewhere. But we maintained our rear-guard of the day before just to make quite sure.

Once we had left our camping ground we got into bare country again, and the nullah closed in considerably, very difficult going, and strewn with rocks. The rise in front cut off all view ahead, though from farther back we had had glimpses of high snow peaks. The snow was still low, and although there was none actually in the nullah it lay above us to either side, while patches showed on the sky-line in front.

The incline got steeper and steeper, and had it not been that Frank knew the ground, we might have doubted the wisdom of following the nullah any

farther. There was no track at all, though once or twice it seemed to me that at one time there might once have been one.

Finally, late in the morning as we approached the sky-line, we found ourselves under a very steep wall of polished black rock, still powdered with snow, and saw the coolies in front snaking along a rough ledge on the face of it. It might have been one hundred and fifty feet high in the centre, where there was a V-shaped depression, in which, framed against the sky, stood Saunders urging up an unwilling or frightened Balti below him. To either side of him the ground rose steeply in knife-edged ridges that showed black rock above the snow patches, and presently lost themselves in undulating snow slopes. About half way up on the slanting ledge stood Lal Singh, arguing firmly, not to say energetically, with another Balti, while at the foot Fateh Khan was starting up the last little group of coolies.

I sympathised a trifle with the Baltis, though outward firmness was essential. It was not what you might call crag work in the Lake District sense of the term, but it was mountaineering for all that, and for laden men it approached the dangerous. Still, it had to be done, and they did it, slowly and unwillingly, it is true, but without any accidents. As Valerie and I followed them, having to stop every few paces to help up Dog Bill, and looked down the drop below us, we mutually congratulated ourselves on not having loads to carry.

Eventually we reached the top, and as we stepped up over the crest, a little stretch of flat, bare rock some ten feet wide, we both gave a gasp of surprise, for the view was so utterly different from what we had expected.

Ahead towered the great snow mountains that we had looked for, their peaks from ten to fifteen miles off, but so immense that in the clear air it seemed as if one could almost touch them. Most of them must have been twenty thousand feet or over, just double the height of the pass on which we stood. Below the main peaks were lesser ones, some snow-clad, some of gaunt, bare rock, where their sides were too precipitous for the snow to cling. It was quite the finest sight either of us had yet had of the high snows.

But the surprising part was the nearer ground, running from the bottom of the slope below us toward the foot of the mountains. From where we were the ground sloped down again pretty steeply, though nothing like as sheer as the wall we had just climbed. It dropped perhaps one thousand feet, and then inclined very gradually into a great circular or rather horseshoe-shaped plain, which seemed to extend right away towards the mountains. And on either hand the plain was ringed with hills running upward from the divide on which we stood to the distant peaks. The plain might have been as much as seven or eight miles long by perhaps five to six broad at the widest part of the irregular horseshoe it formed.

And, most welcome sight, not more than one thousand feet below us there was a thick pine forest which stretched away for half a mile or more on each side, and went well down towards the plain. After the comparatively treeless country we had lived in of late, it was like a bit of Kashmir transported into the barren hills of high Asia.

Dotted along the slope just below us the coolies were resting and talking rather excitedly, while Frank, a few yards ahead, was pointing out various features

of the landscape to Saunders. As we joined them he turned round.

‘It’s unexpected sort of ground, isn’t it, Jim? From the other side you’d have thought that the nullah went up and up to run into the high snows. I really had the surprise of my life when I came up here the first time. Even now I don’t know what brought me here, except just the idea of getting a closer view of the big peaks, which I’d seen from the river. I can’t think why the whole thing isn’t a lake, because all the summer the melting snows from the surrounding hills must be running into it, and I can’t see any kind of opening in the sides, and there’s certainly none the way we’ve come up.’

‘Is this where you found your man?’ I queried.

‘No; he was farther along the ridge to the right, quite three miles on. My camp was on the other side, near where we camped last night. I never got into the plain, because, as I told you, the snow came down the second day, and after that I had to start back. But there’s sure to be some spot where we can camp down there, and for the present, anyway, there’s plenty of water. You can see two or three streams draining down towards those pines from here. Well, I think we’ll push on again now.’

We had no trouble starting the coolies this time. For once they seemed in a hurry to get on, and the rear-guard became unnecessary. In less than an hour’s time we were right into the pine woods, and found the most attractive open glade with some springs running out of a great heap of lichened rocks. There was a stretch of velvety grass starred with the first wild crocus and little blue gentians, an ideal camp site.

‘Good enough, Frank,’ said I. ‘We are not likely

to better this for the moment. Shade — and it will be hot later — fuel, and water on the spot, and a good view of the plain through that opening in front.'

The others agreed that the site was perfect, and so we told Rassula to make the coolies dump their loads and get camp up. While they were doing so we had lunch out of the tiffin basket.

'What's the matter with the blighters?' asked Saunders, looking at the Baltis. 'They'll get heart disease from overwork if they're not careful.'

They certainly were working all out.

'They know it's their last march, and want to impress us, so as to get extra backsheesh,' I suggested.

But it wasn't that at all, as we discovered half an hour later, when they came up in a body and demanded their pay.

'What's it all about, Rassula?' asked Frank. 'They can have their pay to-morrow morning.'

Rassula told them this, and a torrent of expostulations followed, tragic gestures, and incomprehensible appeals to us collectively and individually in fluent Balti, which, of course, we didn't understand.

'They're frightened,' said Saunders, looking at them closely. 'I wonder what the devil it's all about.'

Scared of something or other they certainly were, though their explanations as translated by Rassula were unconvincing. There were leopards there in big numbers, for instance — what danger a large camp ran from a prowling leopard was not clear; it was cold — the valley was warmish at the moment, we thought; their food was running short, and they must get back to their villages, etc., etc., etc.

'What the devil do they really want, Rassula?' asked Frank testily at last.

'They want their pay now, so that they can start

back at once,' said the shikari, somewhat sheepishly. I think he had known that fact the previous day.

'They can't get to any villages to-night, however fast they go. To-morrow evening is the earliest they can reach one if they go all to-day and all to-morrow,' put in Saunders.

Rassula explained that they would get back over the pass and down the valley as far as they could to-night.

'That's their real trouble, I fancy,' said Saunders. 'They don't want to be this side of the pass. Funny devils, aren't they? Afraid of spooks, I suppose, because they've never been here before, and none of their pals have either. What are you going to do, Weston?'

'Let 'em go,' said Frank decisively. 'We don't want them any more for the present. I hate having a lot of shivering sheep round me. They'll upset our own coolies if they stop here.'

'All right, Rassula, they can go. I'll pay them now, and tell 'em with my love that they're a lot of goat-hearted owls.'

I don't know what Rassula did tell them, but it didn't appear to hurt their feelings at all, and their one sentiment seemed to be intense relief at turning their backs on the valley. They had hardly time to waste over haggling about the amount of their back-sheesh, and in half an hour we saw the last of them going up towards the pass at something like three miles an hour or more.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in arranging a really comfortable camp, of a more permanent type than hitherto, for we intended to stop here for some time and explore the near side of the valley first. Later on if we wished to move forward we would

send down to the villages and get some coolies — if they could be induced to come. But, anyway, we had our own four Indians, plus Rassula, his nephew, Gulab Khan, and the three permanent men, so that we could always shift camp in short relays if we wanted to move a few miles either way, and coolies were impossible to get.

It was Frank who first drew our attention to unmistakable leopard tracks near the bank of the stream a little beyond our camp, and we decided that Dog Bill would be tied up at night thereafter. Leopards for some reason or other are very partial to dogs, especially nice little dogs like Bill. There was another fresh set of tracks in the morning, and so we spent the day in felling sapling pines to make a regular little stockade around Valerie's tent, where Bill always slept, and another smaller covered pen, in which we put the half dozen sheep and the fowls we had brought along. We saw no reason to feed 'Spots' free, though later we might risk a sheep as a bait. We had no fear for ourselves or the men, because man-eating panthers were most unlikely in a place where man apparently didn't usually go. Your man-eating leopard is generally only found in places where numbers of villages and quantities of children provide easy prey for a lamed or ailing animal. The healthy beast never attacks human beings: it's only animals who are driven to it from inability to secure other prey that turn to man. But once he's found how easy it is to pull down the two-legged animal, the panther generally sticks to it, and becomes a veritable fiend, since he has far more cunning than the tiger, and is smaller and can hide in less cover.

We passed the following day in very lazy fashion, glad after our long march of the opportunity for over-

hauling kit. Our maker of grass shoes spent his time in weaving grass sandals out of the bundles of fibre rope we had brought for the purpose. The rough grass shoe worn in most of the countries bordering middle Asia is the finest thing yet invented for gripping on rock, but it has the great disadvantage of wearing out very quickly. You get the longest life out of it if it is damped thoroughly before being tied on your feet, but even then it rarely lasts more than two days. The country on either side, with its high rock walls, looked as if we should need them.

Frank was occupied most of the morning in lying out on a rise near by with our telescope, hoping for a glimpse of ibex on the hills above the plain. Eventually he was rewarded by the sight of five tiny dots, which he announced as ibex, and Valerie and I had to climb up to his perch for our first view of the coveted heads. The two shikaris were out on their own, looking for any signs of game, while Saunders and Gulab Khan had disappeared somewhere or other directly after breakfast.

'To-morrow I think we ought to push on and have a good look over the country in front as a preliminary,' said Frank, as he closed the telescope preparatory to going back to camp. 'I want to puzzle out where all the water goes to. There ought by every rule to be a lake here, but I'm hanged if I can see any signs of standing water. I wonder if there's a rift in the hills on either side which leads it off. That would seem the only explanation, but so far I've not been able to spot anything, although there are a lot of nullahs running into the hills on both sides.'

'Let's start early and take lunch with us,' said I. 'It's six or seven miles to those snows in front. We can all go and see. Then later on we can break up

for shikar. We'll have to toss for sides and turns. One each side would be all right.'

'Captain Saunders is late,' remarked Valerie, looking at her wrist watch. 'It's nearly two, and some lunch would not come amiss. One gets hungry at this height.'

But we had actually begun lunch — sitting out under the pines in front of the living tent — before the absentee appeared.

'Where have you been, long 'un?' asked Frank, as Saunders came out of his tent, where he had been removing the traces of his morning's walk. He is a great stickler for the conventions of hair-brushing and hand-washing and the like, no matter where he is, and although we did our best with him, nothing would stop him putting on a coat for meals.

'I've been sweating up to investigate that pass we came over.'

'What for?' I queried.

'Well, it struck me yesterday that the bally place was not quite natural.'

'I'd have said that it was quite a natural kind of dip,' said I.

'It may be a natural dip, but if you'd looked as close as I did you'd have seen that the actual pass is worn too deep and too narrow for any natural agency except water, and water doesn't run uphill. The only other thing that could wear a trench like that is feet — hundreds of years of feet, I should think.'

'But it doesn't seem to lead anywhere,' objected Valerie.

'It leads to this plain and the hills in front, Miss Weston,' corrected Saunders. 'Some time or other there must have been a lot of traffic over it. Not recently, though, since there's no track either side. Years and years ago.'

‘That’s interesting if you’re right, long’un.’ Frank was listening thoughtfully. ‘It seems to be the only way out of the plain, and if there was ever anything here to come for, they’d have used that dip.’

‘Quite,’ replied Saunders. ‘And you dragged us up here with a very definite idea that there was or had been something that people might come for.’

‘But that wall we came over was not the sort of thing that people would have kept on a much used road. They’d have made it a bit easier, surely.’

‘They might, Everitt. On the other hand, they might not. Certainly not if they didn’t want too many people to come. It’s an easy place to guard as it is.’

‘What’s the idea?’ queried Frank. Saunders clearly had something in his head.

‘Well, don’t you see — *if*, a big “if” perhaps, but if there were mines in this valley, the owners, whoever they were, probably the local rulers, would have kept it closed except just for the workers and the guards. There’d have been guards certainly, for you can take it the mines, if there were any, were probably worked by slave labour. According to Jim, slavery has only died out here in the last thirty or forty years, even if it is dead across the mountains there, which is doubtful. With slave labour, why make your roads easier? If they break their necks periodically, it doesn’t matter.’

Saunders’s remark set me thinking then in a way I hadn’t thought before. It certainly was just the sort of place in which you could picture an old-time slave settlement. Only that narrow entrance, which would be so easy to guard. There was water enough there, and perhaps in the old days, if there was anything in Saunders’s theory, some of the plain ahead

would have been cultivated, and then there would be no need to bring up anything much in the way of supplies.

I tried to visualise something of the scenes there in the unrecorded past. Pictured the droves of captives, all sorts of men — Baltis, Ladakhis, Kashmiris, Sikhs, and Dogras too, perhaps — in the days when the Afghans held Kashmir, in the good happy days when a strong Government enforced fines for murder, ten shillings per corpse, half to the rulers and half to the dead man's family. But only four shillings if the victim was of the opposite religion to the party in power.

I wondered if there would have been women too, and decided that very likely there were. The old and the ill-favoured probably, sent along because their captors had no use for them. Life has always been a cheap proposition in the East until quite recently, but it would have been more economical to send along the useless female part of your captives than to slit their throats. You would get more work out of the men if there was some one to cook and do odd jobs.

The picture I conjured up was unpleasing, especially when I looked at Valerie, and I felt rather glad that we belonged to a later age and to a Western nation. But nevertheless Saunders's theory was intriguing. I began to take more interest in the quest after that. Hitherto the idea had seemed so fantastic, savoured too much of the adventure romance in a world where everything was mapped and recorded, where aeroplanes had opened up so much, and Everest seemed about the only place where modern man had not as yet set his foot, and that too appeared to be on the verge of being conquered. The last papers

we had seen at Srinagar had had accounts of the Everest party's setting out.

' . . . I'm certain now that I've seen him before, but I can't quite fix where.'

Saunders's voice brought me back again to the actual present. He was talking of Gulab Khan, it seemed.

'Mysterious kind of bird, but I'll place him yet. I was watching him this morning when we were out. No man who hasn't been drilled ever walked like he does. I wish I could catch the idea that's somewhere at the back of my mind about him. I'm not an imaginative cove, and I'd almost swear I'd seen him before.'

'I'd like to know what brought him up in these parts too,' put in Frank. 'Perhaps he's wanted at home and is keeping out of the way. But he's worth his keep, anyhow. Funny what you say about feeling he's been drilled. I was overhauling my rifles that day at Kiris with Lal Singh, and Gulab Khan kept hanging about. I tried the Mannlicher at the end, and for a rag asked Gulab if he could shoot, and offered him a couple of rounds. By the way he cuddled the butt into his shoulder it wasn't the first time he'd handled a gun, not by a long chalk. He had some yarn about having had a gun in his village. Of course, there are a lot of guns in the hill villages, nominally to scare birds off the crops; but one doesn't see small-bore bolt rifles, and he seemed very familiar with the action.'

We fell to talking over the idiosyncrasies of the fighting races after that, and then, of course, the talk slid back to the war years — to France and Mesopotamia and half the world beside. But it was the mention of the Indian frontier and the third Afghan

War that eventually sent Saunders into a sort of trance.

'I've got it,' he said suddenly at last. 'Landi Kotal it was, and I had a beard ——' It was hard to picture the immaculate Saunders with a beard. 'I'd got my face chipped about a bit from a rico that pushed a lot of stone splinters in,' he explained. 'So I couldn't shave for ten days or so, not properly anyway.'

'What are you getting at?' I asked.

'Gulab Khan. Now I know where I've seen him. It all comes back. There was a fracas in the camp of the regiment next to my field company. Somebody got shot — an Indian officer or an N.C.O.; I forget which. A bullet came into my tent — damned thing smashed my hair-wash — and I hopped out to see what was up, and found their quarter-guard tying up a man who was supposed to have made the mess. I don't know what happened, because I left for Dacca next morning, but I don't forget faces much, and I believe that the man was Gulab Khan.'

'Good Lord!' said I. 'But it can't be the same man. Presumably the bloke you saw would have been strung up, or anyway sent off for life to the Andamans.'

'He might have got off on some plea; or more likely got away with a short term on the grounds of severe provocation. One never knows what's underneath that kind of shows. All sorts of funny things come out at trials.'

'Are you sure?' asked Frank, sucking at his pipe.

'We don't want a fellow here who may run amok some time. He often carries the rifles, too.'

'I'm as sure as any one can be over remembering a face you've only seen once, and that nearly five years ago.'

‘We’d better have him up and question him.’

‘No — I think not,’ said Saunders judicially. ‘Let’s try and make him commit himself a bit first. Catch him out somehow. I’ll think out something in the next day or two when I’ve remembered something more. It’ll probably come back presently. Things always do when you’ve got the main peg. Your mention of Landi Kotal was just what I wanted. That brought it all back. Leave him alone for the present.’

So we dropped the matter of Gulab Khan for the time, and spent the rest of the afternoon plotting out our route for the morrow. We decided that we would all go, and we expected to be out practically the whole day. I was engaged most of the evening in getting out a rough sketch of the plain and fixing bearing points, with the idea of making some sort of a survey of the place. It would be rather fun to return to India with even a few miles of unexplored country in my pocket, so to speak, with which to annoy an old pal of mine in the Survey of India, who is meticulously accurate in all his work. I wanted to confront him with the maps for which his service was responsible, together with the damning evidence that where his degree sheet showed glaciers and peaks was really quite a respectable plain.

And then I saw Gulab Khan moving out of camp with his axe, and wondered how much there was in Saunders’s theory, and whether the Punjabi’s weird ritual had anything to do with Landi Kotal of five years back.

CHAPTER V

THE HORSE-SHOE PLAIN

THE sun was only just topping the high peaks to our right next morning when we set out from camp on our first journey of exploration into the great horse-shoe plain that lay below the pine forest wherein we were camped. We were accustomed to early morning starts by now, but to-day there was the difference that behind us was no long row of laden coolies or shorter line of baggage ponies.

Just ourselves, with the two shikaris, Lal Singh, and a couple of coolies, who carried the lunch-basket and various other minor oddments. The air was cold still after the night, and we were glad to keep on our coats, though by midday we should be equally glad to discard them in favour of rolled-up shirt sleeves.

As we moved out of the last pines we got our first real view of the great plain, still partly in shadow on the east side, a bare expanse of gently undulating ground, sometimes green stretches of grass, sometimes barer patches of sandy soil, and here and there sudden outcrops of naked grey and brown rock, with occasionally the silver gleam of winding streamlets fed from the melting snows on the higher hills around.

From time to time we passed little burrows of marmots, which aroused all Dog Bill's hunting instincts as he dashed after the little animals, only to find them vanish in their holes at the last possible moment, leaving him to scratch furiously but fruitlessly in the sandy soil where they had disappeared. Occasionally ravens, too, harassed him, flapping away

heavily on jet-black wings just as he thought he had really got them.

As we went we looked most carefully for any signs of an old road across the plain, but saw nothing which, even by the wildest stretch of imagination, might be construed as being the remains of a highway, such as the existence of the worn dip in the rocks on the pass might postulate.

'In a plain like this, though, there's nothing to keep one to any very definite line, and any track, however well beaten, would vanish after two or three winters' disuse,' said Frank. He was plodding along with Saunders just ahead of Valerie and me, old green puttoo hat, still adorned with the mallard plumes of last year's sport, pulled well down over his eyes, for the glare was getting stronger as we got nearer to the great snows in front.

'I wonder where the water all goes to,' said Saunders for about the tenth time as we got closer to the lowest part of the plain, which seemed to be dipping rather more steeply. 'The ground in front rises fairly sharply now up to that ridge ahead.' He indicated a long low feature of irregular rocks, which so far had cut off all view of the part of the plain nearer to the snows.

It was a saw-edged ridge of dark-coloured rocks, now higher, now lower, that seemed to form a barrier right across the plain, which here, as we approached the upper end of the horseshoe, might have been some five miles in breadth. There were one or two gaps in it, but they seemed winding gaps, for they gave us no view through to the farther side.

We were within half a mile of the ridge ere we suddenly stumbled on the answer to the drainage question as Frank's quick remark called our attention.

'By Jove! Look at that! That's evidently where all the water goes to,' he said, as we stopped on a slight rise to see a few hundred yards in front of us a long line of ravine under the ridge in front — a ravine that wound away to either hand, to lose itself in the hills to east and west.

'Widish looking, and the farther banks are pretty sheer,' he went on. 'Look; you can see now that there are two or three streams running into it from the ridge. There must be a waterfall or two, I should say.'

We pushed on quickly, for all of us were anxious to see what lay in the ravine, but it was Dog Bill who got there first in frantic chase after a slow-flying raven. He was going all out over the rather broken soil near the edge of the ravine, barking continuously. Then suddenly he checked dead, and fell back on his haunches.

'Makes one think of hounds checking on the Lora,' said Frank, referring to the steep-banked river draining the Baluchistan plain. 'Bill's come on to a sheer drop by the look of him. It takes something pretty steep to stop him when he's after a bird.'

But it was not until we joined the terrier that we realised how very steep it was, steep beyond all hope of descent.

'And how the devil are we going to get across that?' said Saunders as we stopped.

A question that none of us could answer as we stood there in the sunlight, the men on either side of us peering down into the dim depths below, whence came the sound of fast-running water. It was sheer cliff, nothing less, that gaped there, perhaps two hundred feet drop to the shadowed stream below, ghostly grey rock, with whitened plants clinging here and

there. And on either side the drop continued as sheer and as unclimbable as far as we could see up and down the winding canyon. It might have been a hundred feet across at the point where Bill had stopped, and the farther side was even higher, running almost sheer into the rocky ridge we had marked.

'We aren't getting across, by the look of it,' said Frank, craning over the drop. 'We've got to find some other place either up or downstream. I expect there will be a gap in the bank somewhere, probably where one of the streams runs in from this side.'

'We'd better split and go opposite ways,' I suggested. 'It's not nine yet, and we could get out to the cliffs on either side and be back here by about two. What about fixing that rock there for lunch rendezvous, and meanwhile some of us go each way?'

About three quarters of a mile to our right was a high, cone-shaped rock just above the ravine, a very prominent landmark.

'That's a sound idea,' said Saunders. 'Shall you and I go westward, Weston, and leave Everitt and your sister to try their luck towards the east?'

'Right-o! We'll take Rassula and Lal Singh, and you two can have the others,' said Frank, filling his pipe.

So on that Valerie and I, followed by Karima, the second shikari, with the tiffin coolie and Dog Bill, set out along the bank of the ravine to eastward. We went fairly slowly, always seeking any possible way down, but found nothing until we reached the high rock. Beyond that were one or two streams, which might perhaps give some place that could be descended.

We stopped under the rock for a moment. Its sides were smooth and sheer apparently all round, an

ice-polished rock pillar that was evidently some survival of a prehistoric ice age. No ice movement of our days could have so scored and ground the flanks of the great pinnacle that hung nearly a hundred feet above us.

'Wouldn't that be a topping place for a fort if only there was a way up?' remarked Valerie. 'But there doesn't seem to be a path of any sort, or any place you could climb. Hulloo, though; look at Bill! Billum! how did you get there?' And in reply he put out a pink tongue at us, and yelped from where his little black-and-white head protruded from the apparently sheer rock twenty feet above.

'There must be some way up,' said I. 'Let's look on the farther side.'

We went round, and there, sure enough, was a very narrow winding pathway snaking up the face of the rock, cut, moreover, into rough steps that at some period had been worn smooth, and hollowed by the passing of many feet.

'There's no doubt this plain was inhabited at some time. This might have been the base of a fort.'

I led on up the steps, noting as I went how the wall was slightly hollowed on the inner side, as happens with a frequently used stairway in the course of time. On our left, of course, was only the drop to the ground we had left. The path was very narrow, which accounted for our not having seen it from below, and it spiralled round the face of the pinnacle, until at about fifty feet up it led us over the sheer drop into the ravine, out into which the great rock pillar jutted.

I have a good head for heights, and Valerie has a fair one, but I clung very close to the inner wall, and thanked the gods that there was no wind that day.

And when I'd gone another three yards I stopped again, this time finally, for the good and sufficient reason that I was on a rather wider platform-like place upon the farther edge of which stood Dog Bill sniffing into space. Beyond the platform the stairway continued upward rather more steeply, but only after a gap of some twelve or thirteen feet, where there was no rock ledge, only a few stone projections of blocks that had once been let into the cliff face to carry a road, probably one of timber, which had rotted away in the course of years, and finally vanished.

'Come on, Valerie, and see this!' I put out my hand to help her round the corner on to the platform.

'We've really stumbled on an old fort, I fancy. I believe there are possibilities in Saunders's theories.'

'Look there, do you see how the rock is cut into?'

The inner side of the platform, which was about five feet wide by six feet long, ran into a recess perhaps seven or eight feet deep, unornamented and plain, but clearly cut four-square by the hand of man.

We sat down there for a little, Karima standing on the platform looking across the ravine. We had left the laden coolie at the foot.

'I don't think we shall find much by going any farther,' said I.

'Why not?' asked Valerie, looking across at the other side through her lorgnettes — she is rather short-sighted, but never wears glasses except for games, preferring the dainty little silver lorgnettes, which always hang round her neck on the most fragile of silver chains. I am quite an expert in patching those chains, which are always snapping.

'Because, don't you see, this is obviously the place

where whoever used to live here crossed the ravine. This platform we are sitting on is clearly the head of the bridge that used to be here. This is the narrowest point of the ravine as far as we've come, and, as far as I can see, upstream too. The gap is not much more than twenty feet, and you can see there's a depression running down from the ridge in front to the point directly opposite.'

It was as I said. The pinnacle projected some way into the ravine, and the opposite bank curved out towards us into a knife edge of granite, the nearest point of which was certainly very little more than twenty feet from the edge of our platform, though lower down it bent inwards again.

'You're right, Jim,' said she, going forward to look over the edge. 'But I wish we could see beyond that ridge in front. It's still a good deal higher than this bank.'

'Sixty or seventy feet, I should say. We might just get a glimpse if we could get to the top of this. But there seems to be no way up.'

I was examining the recess as I spoke, in the hope of there being a stone door leading inward. But even the most cursory of glances showed that my hope was vain. The back of the recess was just the natural rock, still showing the tool marks on its face.

I turned round again. 'We might be able to bridge that gap to the stairs with some pine trunks later on. It would be worth getting up to the top. There might be some ruins of sorts. What are you digging at there?'

She was prodding at the edge of the path with the point of her shooting-stick.

'Hole. There was a railing here once.'

'I wish there was still,' said I. Despite a reason-

able head for heights, I do like something to put my hands on in a place like that. The drop below us must have been well over one hundred and fifty feet even here, where the ravine was not so deep as at the point where we had first reached it.

Then something else struck me.

'It's the wrong side to have a fort, person.'

'Why the wrong side?'

'Because a fort this side would be more use in keeping people in the bit of ground between the ravine and the hills than in keeping them out. I can't imagine there being anything dangerous on the farther side. If there was anything worth safeguarding there, you'd want your defences across the ravine. Of course, nature put this pinnacle here, and so they used it for a fort, and there may be defences hidden in the ridge opposite. Still . . .'

'Still . . . What? You're not an itinerant storyteller, Jim, waiting for the bowl to go round. What?'

'Well, if you'd got a lot of slaves or convicts on the other bank, you'd put your guard tower this side, wouldn't you? We passed no defences coming up.'

'Meaning that Captain Saunders's ideas are not so far-fetched after all?'

'Even so, brainy person. In fact, with a stretch of imagination, you might use this tower place as an argument to support them; and note you, the gap in the stair to the fort is above the old bridge, not below it. If you wanted to protect the bridge you'd have put that gap below it so as to keep communication with the other side, whereas it would seem that the owners were more concerned about any one who might try to cross the bridge from over there rather than any one coming the way we've come. Valerie, I think we are going to bump on something!'

'I always did think so, Jim,' said she. But, woman-like, she didn't say what she thought we were going to bump on.

'Well, we'd better get on upstream now, but I don't believe we shall find anywhere to cross. I'll go first, and you can follow with Karima behind. We'll send Dog Bill ahead or he'll trip one of us up, and it's a long way to the floor.'

As I expected, we didn't find anything in the nature of another crossing, although the ravine steadily decreased in depth as we neared the hills, very steep cliffs just at this point. Such streams as we found dropped over sheer into the ravine in little cascades.

'There must be a way across at the head waters,' said Valerie not unreasonably. 'Only then, of course, the bridge and the tower would be no good.'

'The ravine runs right into the cliffs there, and it probably drains all the snow on the slope above. Perhaps we shall find another watch tower,' I suggested.

But we didn't. Instead of that we followed the ravine about a mile into the cliffs under the most precipitous of rock walls, in whose crannies there was still snow, and snow now on the banks, here hardly more than fifty feet above the stream. The sun could only reach some of the places we passed just at sunset in midsummer, and the snow we trod might have been there for years.

It was a cold, ghostly, cheerless place, and one's sense of disquietude was added to by the rushing noise of the water in the confined space, a sound that was shortly drowned by a steady boom in front, that seemed to make all the air vibrate about us.

It was Valerie who first understood the phenomenon.

‘You’re right, Jim. There won’t be a crossing, although the bank is getting lower. There’ll be a fall in front.’

Her guess proved correct, for ten minutes later, in a noise that prevented us hearing our own words, we turned into a little circular opening, the foot of a great natural well-like shaft with slimy grey sides, utterly unclimbable, down one wall of which fell a cascade of grey ice-water, a liquid curtain perhaps ninety or a hundred feet above our heads, falling yet another thirty feet sheer below our feet into a great boiling rock-walled pool.

In the grey gloom of the place, with the shuddering noise of the falling water, the long whitened festoons of slimy rock plants, hardly lighted by the little opening of blue sky that showed above us, I could understand that a superstitious people might have held it to be an abode of devils. Even Dog Bill, who has more intelligence than some human beings I have met, seemed impressed, and his tail had no longer the forward angle it had kept all the morning.

‘What a wonderful place,’ said Valerie, sitting on a rock and looking up at the falling water, the spray-laden air making her hair wisp damply across her forehead. ‘But it’s uncanny, isn’t it?’

‘Karima thinks so, too; likewise Dog Bill.’ Both our followers — we had left the coolie at the rock fort — were evidently anxious to get back into the sunlight, and when we had made quite certain that there was no chance of crossing the stream we retraced our way back to the pinnacle.

On our return journey we followed a slightly different route, a little farther back from the ravine bank, and about three hundred yards from the base of the tower rock came upon what were unmistak-

able old foundations of buildings, clearly abandoned years and years before. Small buildings they had been, with one slightly bigger one among them, the feet of whose rough stone walls still showed above the soil.

‘Assuming Saunders’s theory to be true, that’s where the guards and the governor of the place used to live,’ said I. ‘Makes you think of the old sites at Taxila, doesn’t it, with these funny little narrow rooms all huddled together?’

And that took us back to certain joyous memories of a very happy day spent in the recently excavated ruins of Taxila near Pindi, one of the most famous of the Græco-Buddhist cities which that artist in destruction, the White Hun, laid waste thirteen hundred years ago. Both of us had thought of the contrast of that quiet Sunday with its picnic surroundings, and what the scene must have been on the day when the White Hun had swept in through the gates, the White Hun whose boast it was that he left nothing alive in the cities he took, man or woman, child or beast. The children’s broken toys are still there in cases in the museum, little horses and carts and dolls of clay, and the women’s cheap ornaments of the kind that were not worth carrying away in the invader’s saddle-bags, wooden combs and hair ornaments that somehow had escaped the fire whose traces still blacken some of the stonework, the fire that finished off any stricken thing to whom the zealous Hun might have omitted to give the *coup de grâce*.

We were still talking of Taxila, sitting in such shade as we could find under the great rock, when the others came up after a fruitless journey.

‘Well, did you find a crossing?’ we asked.

‘Not a hope,’ said Saunders gloomily, casting him-

self down next to us, and reaching for one of the water-bottles. 'Not a blooming hope as far as we went. The nullah seems to get deeper as you go on. We followed it right into the hills over there. We hadn't time to get to the end, but it runs out somewhere obviously. What did you find? Presumably not a crossing, since you're still this side.'

'Yes; we found a crossing,' said I, whereat he sat up excitedly. 'Only you can't cross by it.' He lay back again despondently. 'It's up above us now.'

'Don't be funny, Everitt,' said he. 'We're not giddy birds.'

'It's quite true; isn't it, Valerie?'

She looked up from the tiffin basket, whose contents she was extricating.

'Quite true, Captain Saunders. Only the last people, or else the weather, removed the means of crossing. There used to be a bridge.'

Even Frank, who generally hides his enthusiasm under a cloak of nonchalance, got excited then, and I had to take them up the staircase and show them the bridge platform and point out the ruined sites we had found. When we returned to tiffin I think we were all convinced that we really were on the edge of a discovery, and the ibex which Frank had been so keen about the previous day rather faded out of our thoughts.

After lunch we took them to see the great falls, and I think they were even more impressed than we had been. With the westering sun falling in the mouth of the gorge, the sudden transition to the gloom in the amphitheatre of the fall was even more pronounced than earlier in the day, and the party was very silent as we stood looking at the great sheet of falling water.

'I wonder if it ever freezes,' said Saunders at last.

'I doubt it,' said Frank. 'Even when all the surface of snow is frozen and the lower part is packed into ice by the cold and the pressure, you find water running away below. No; these falls are an impossible stop for any one on the far side.'

'Well, what are we going to do next?' I asked, as we made our way back to the plain.

'See if we can find a way up the hills, and so get past the falls,' said Frank. 'I found my man over there.' He pointed to the hills on the east of the plain about three miles short of the ravine. 'He must have got past the falls somehow or other.'

'Why *must*?' I objected. 'You don't know he was ever on the other side of the ravine.'

'Well, anyway, the thing that made the tracks went off in that direction,' he replied.

And then, as ever, we fell to theories as to who his man had been, and who was the other person, theories that came to a startling climax the following morning, which we spent in camp making up loads for Frank and Saunders, who had decided to go up the hills, one on each side, and see if there was any way round. To save time they had decided to spend the following night out, or anyway to be prepared to do so if necessary. There would also be the chance of a shot at an ibex, although ibex were beginning to take a secondary place in view of our discoveries the previous day.

I was lazily reading a book when Saunders suggested I should come with him a little way out of camp, as he wanted to try his rifle, a new one that he had bought on the way up from South India, and so far had had no opportunity of trying.

'You might bring your pistol, too,' he said. 'I am rather keen on hand-guns, and never like being sep-

arated from my pet revolver and my automatic, even under the most peaceful conditions.'

I went and got my revolver, and when I came out of the tent I found Saunders waiting with Gulab Khan carrying his new Mannlicher Schœnauer, a rather dainty weapon with a telescopic sight.

Saunders explained somewhat lengthily that his Sikh was busy cooking his and Lal Singh's midday meal, so he had brought Gulab instead. Then apropos of nothing he asked if my revolver was loaded, and when I said that it wasn't, suggested that I might load it.

'You never know when something won't bob up, and I know you're nuts on snap-shooting.'

I am, as a matter of fact. Once upon a time when I was a subaltern in a part of India where rifle thieves don't exist, my revolver used to lie on my dressing-table, so that I could practise snapping while dressing.

I loaded the weapon, and we went off through the pines to a little open stretch, where Saunders proposed to stick up the old newspaper Gulab Khan was carrying for a target.

CHAPTER VI

GULAB KHAN'S STORY

It was a longish stretch of open grass glade in the woods, the far end showing a vista into the plain below us, where some three hundred yards away stood a couple of isolated trees and a small clump of rocks.

'We'll pin up the paper on the biggest tree, and Gulab Khan can do marker,' said Saunders. 'Let's begin at a hundred yards, and go back to two and then to three. I'd like a few shots at each distance.'

He pinned up the paper, in the centre of which he had made a rough bull's-eye with ink, explaining to Gulab Khan that he was to take cover behind the rocks, and come out after each shot to show us the strike of the bullet.

The rifle proved to be a gem of a weapon, and Saunders seemed a useful marksman. I am one myself, and know what good shooting is. I had a couple of shots with it at two hundred, and it was as pretty a gun as I have handled, though I still cling to my rather old and battered .303, a pre-war possession, which has wandered a few thousand miles with me. I like to think, when looking at a buck over my sights, that in the past I have looked over them at far more dangerous game, for after all, when you come to think of it, man is the most dangerous of all game. The regimental armourer cut the stock down into sporting pattern, and she is fitted with special sights, and I still back her against anything that hasn't got telescopic sights. The telescope and cross-hairs, of course, give any rifle a most unfair advantage.

Finally, Saunders was satisfied and picked him-

self up, brushing off the pine needles from his stockings, as he called to Gulab Khan to bring the target. Between us we had made a pleasing mess of the bull's-eye.

'A good rifle, sahib,' said Gulab Khan, the fighting man's satisfaction at a good weapon in his eyes.

'A good gun, Gulab,' said Saunders. 'Do you think you could clean it while Everitt sahib and I shot with the pistol?'

Gulab took the rifle and the cleaning cord which Saunders handed him.

'Watch him,' said Saunders quietly, taking the revolver from me, and looking about for a convenient target.

I watched the man, and there was no question but that he knew how to clean a rifle. More, he cleaned it after the fashion of the drill-book, toe of the butt to the ground so as to get a straight pull through the muzzle.

'Platoon! Shun!' Saunders's voice snapped behind me, and for all the fact that we were in the heart of Baltistan, my feet tried to go together; but there was no mistaking the quiver in the Punjabi's limbs as he straightened up.

'Ground arms!' snapped the voice again, and before he could stop himself, Gulab had laid the rifle down. Then he seemed to realise the trap, and looked wildly about him for an instant.

'Three paces step back, march!' came the swift order, and this time Saunders's pistol barrel swung round into line with the man's chest; and as the Punjabi looked along it to the steady grey eyes behind the sights, he stepped back in orthodox military fashion, three paces, neither more nor less, and stood rigid.

Then Saunders dropped into the vernacular — drill words of command in the Indian army are always in English.

‘You learnt that in a regiment, Gulab Khan; and the last time you heard it was in . . . Landi . . . Kotal.’

The man’s face went as grey as an Indian’s can, the cheek muscles twitched, and his throat worked as though about to speak.

‘Stand quite still,’ continued Saunders. ‘Yes, at Landi Kotal in the — Regiment. You remember the day when the jamadar was killed during a rifle inspection?’

The steady voice stopped as Saunders stood looking at the man, waiting for him to speak.

‘Sahib, how should I forget? Though how the sahib learnt, God knows! And now? Will the sahib shoot? But no, that is not the way of the sahibs. There will be police and the jail first.’ The voice was resigned now, after the first two passionate sentences. ‘I shall be taken back to Srinagar chained to a Dogra policeman. Sahib, I would rather die here, now, since it is my fate.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Saunders in a level tone. ‘But it is not, as you say, the manner of the sahibs to kill without trial. Beside the police and the jail, there is the court. And before the court, there is the commanding sahib’s questioning. What happened there?’

‘There was no questioning,’ said the Punjabi. ‘The sahib knows that.’

‘The devil I don’t,’ said Saunders to me. ‘We don’t know anything, but we’d better pretend we do. *Bluffons-nous* is the ticket. I wonder if he escaped. I’ll chance it. It’s a shot in the dark, but if he thinks

we know the whole story we're more likely to get the truth.' He turned to Gulab again.

'True talk. When the questioning time came you were no longer there, of course. You escaped in the night.' Pretty obviously he was not likely to have escaped in daylight.

'As the sahib says. Otherwise I would have died. Were there not four witnesses against me? Though how the sahib knows is hidden from me. I do not recognise the sahib's face,' and he peered at Saunders, trying to recognise him.

'It doesn't matter how I know, since I do. But now since there was no questioning by the commanding sahib, then Everitt sahib and I will do the questioning, so that we may consider what shall be best. You may sit, but don't move from where you are, not even half a pace.'

It is hopeless to try to get the truth out of an Oriental if you make him stand up. There is a remote chance of its being forthcoming if he can squat down quietly in front of a sahib whom he trusts.

We two sat down on the pine needles a few feet from the Punjabi, Saunders with the pistol lying across his knees.

'Now tell us the truth, and remember there were four witnesses whose tale was written down.' That was a perfectly safe remark. I pictured the court of inquiry the day after the murder, when they found that Gulab was missing. I also wondered what had happened to the unfortunate guard commander. 'To begin with, did you kill the jamadar or didn't you?'

'I did not, sahib. When I am tried there will be three men to say I did; the fourth, whom I seek, is no longer there. Nevertheless, as Allah sees, I did not

do the killing, nor did I know it was to be done, though I had fears.'

'Why do you seek one who is a witness against you?'

'So that I may kill him. I have sought him these four years now that I may pay what is due. He it was that did the killing, though of that I take little count, since the jamadar was no friend of mine, though in truth no enemy either.'

'And that explains the axe,' said Saunders to me. 'I thought there was something funny about it. This is going to be interesting.' He turned to Gulab Khan again. 'Tell the whole story as it was, and if we hand you to the police we will say nothing. Only remember that we know what happened, and so keep to the truth.'

'The sahib does not know all the truth. He only knows something of the end of the tale, and not all of that. The tale is a long one, beginning even before I joined the regiment, in the days before the Great War. If the sahibs will listen to a dead man's tale, I will tell from the beginning.'

'We listen, Gulab,' replied Saunders.

The Punjabi, squatting there in the sunlight under the pine trees, his eyes on Saunders, seeking ever to recognise the man who somehow had learnt what he thought known to no one save the regiment he had left so long ago, began his tale, and as I listened to the sing-song story, hundreds of miles away from where the happenings had taken place, even though his speech was simple and his description crude, I could not but picture again those events of the past. The wind-stirred pines of that lost valley under the eternal snows became the fragrant pines of the Murrce hills that have held so much for me, the

flower-strewn turf beyond us was transformed into the bare rocky ground of the frontier passes, and the untrodden mountains about us changed into the menacing low hills of the border, where ever the knife and the lead go hand in hand, and the kiss of to-day is paid for by the steel of to-morrow.'

'It was in my father's time, sahibs, that the first seed was sown, when, owing to ill-feeling in the house, his younger brother turned to an enemy, hidden, but ready still for any chance, like the poison that lies in the tooth of the *krait*.

'And the seed turned to the blossom when first my father sought to arrange my marriage. She was the only daughter of the headman of the village, who had neither son nor brother. And my father's brother hoped also that his son, who was my elder, and who had hated me since the time when, even though younger than he by full twelve months, I had shown I was the better man in the village akara (wrestling-pit), might marry her, and in time perhaps take over the headmanship.

'And in those days — it was the first year of the Great War, the furlough season before the war began — we were both at home, my cousin Baz Khan and myself. We were both lance-naiks (lance-corporals) then, and we were well considered of our sahibs, for Baz Khan was clever and, moreover, of greater book learning than me, though not so good a wrestler nor so fine a shot.

'The matter of the marriage was finally settled, for the headman was of a covetous disposition, and we held more land than did my father's brother. The following evening it was, when walking home under a cliff where men cut stone for building, that a great stone slipped, and but for the chance that I

was leading my pony I also should have fallen with the beast into the gulf below, whence with ropes the chumars drew up his body next day for the sake of the hide.

‘But my cousin, of course, was said to have been away from home with kinsfolk of his mother’s in another village. Therefore ’twas no use to say that the figure I saw above me in the dusk as I crouched under a rock for fear of other stones was his. Nevertheless, I trod warily thereafter in my ways; but who can fight with a snake in the dark?’

‘At first the regiment did not go to the war, since we were in the frontier posts beyond Kohat. Only first my cousin went to France with another pultan, and then I went to Basra, and our ways lay apart till near the end of the war.

‘But after the war there was leave again, and I was married. But my cousin, who was in Egypt, was not there. We were both colour havildars then, and at the top of the roll for jamadar, my cousin, as always, one place ahead of me.

‘And then we met in the Afghan War, together with our old regiment at Landi Kotal. Baz Khan met me with great friendliness, speaking not of the past, and I, being a fool, considered perhaps that the enmity was somewhat softened, since in time he would become a jamadar, and also he held a jangi inam of land, for he had done well in the war, though not so well as I.

‘And about then there came to the pultan a new jamadar from another regiment, one brought by the commanding sahib, who likewise was new come from elsewhere. And my cousin waxed wroth, because he said that his face had been blackened, and his right broken, since it was his turn for the jamadari. And

he considered that it were well that the jamadar should be removed; in war such things are easy.

‘But since I had none to support me, to tell such a tale to the sahibs would have been vain, and therefore I considered it was better to watch my cousin more closely.

‘But even the very next day, when I was commanding a piquet, the jamadar found that certain bombs were missing. As Allah sees, those very bombs I had counted and put in their proper place, but it is clear now that it was my cousin who caused them to be removed so that the blame might fall upon me. He was cunning, as I have said.

‘The jamadar — an overbearing man — would not listen to my tale; and though by the aid of my captain sahib, who knew me of old, I escaped with little but hard words from the commanding sahib, still was my face blackened, and I knew that I should probably lose my chance of jamadari.

‘And then — Baz Khan learnt his guile in hell, where he will go when I have dealt with him — the blossom of his enmity turned to fruit. There was a rifle inspection next day. As the sahib knows, it is not usual for the inspecting officer to examine the rifles of the senior N.C.O.’s, more so of men like me who are known throughout the regiment as *markis-men*. But the jamadar, being already aggrieved against me, looked at mine, and lo! though I had cleaned it overnight, the barrel was foul with rust. He spoke to me sharply, whereby my face was even more blackened, and bade me clean it and bring it to him when the parade was over.

‘Which I did, not knowing that thereby I was but serving my cousin’s turn, since the jamadar lived in a tent in a corner of the trenches around the camp, a corner screened by a high mound of earth.

‘And even as I showed my rifle to the jamadar — who was of somewhat evil temper just then, and spoke dirt to me loudly — a rifle was fired behind me, and the jamadar fell forward upon me, dead, with blood pouring from his mouth.

‘At the same moment men flung themselves upon me, and I heard my cousin’s voice shouting as a second shot was fired. The men held me down, but I could see my cousin holding my rifle, from which he had fired the second shot. His rifle, I think, was taken by another man, who cleaned it by stealth.

‘And then came a sahib, to whom they showed the jamadar’s body, and the two empty cartridge-cases, and my rifle with the new-fouled barrel. And my cousin made great show of his sorrow at the deed I had done, and said how he had feared that there was enmity between me and the jamadar, and how he had followed me when I went to show the rifle so that he might avert any untoward happening, but had come too late. And the other three men bore out his words, and said they heard angry words between the jamadar and myself.

‘Thereafter they placed me in the quarter-guard, bound, but that night there was an alarm, and the camp was fired into heavily, especially by the guard tents, so that the guard had to take cover in the open. And the guard havildar, who was friendly to me, remembering that I was bound inside, came to loose me so that I might be taken to safety outside. And as he unfastened the locks of the chain wherewith I was bound to some logs of wood, a chance bullet slew him.

‘A desperate man works speedily, and with the keys I loosened the fetter about my wrist and slipped away into the darkness. There was much shooting

at the moment, and I passed through the camp unnoticed and through a certain gap in the wire, which I had marked that morning to tell my sahib of, so that it might be repaired, for a frightened camel had broken it down. Then in the darkness I made my way back to Jamrud, where, lying hidden all that day, I reached Peshawar the next, by fortune escaping the sight of either troops or Pathans.

‘My kismet was good, for I contrived to change my uniform, and by degrees I made my way back to my home, but, daring not to enter my village, lay concealed in the woods by a certain place, where my youngest brother was accustomed to come for grazing our cattle.

‘The second day he came, and as I hailed him softly I saw that he had been weeping. When he understood that it was indeed I — I had let my beard grow these ten days — he told me that the police had come to our village only two days gone seeking news of me, having orders from the Depiti sahib, to whom telegrams had been sent from Landi Kotal.

‘My father, who was old, was even then very ill. I lay there for a week while my brother fed me. Then one day he came not. But next day he told me that my father had died, for I was his favourite son.

‘Then we took counsel, and decided that I should go away into Kashmir, where none would know me. Which I did, in the train of a sahib who was going towards Leh for six months.

‘Then that winter I returned to my hills, and met my brother again, and he told me that Baz Khan had indeed become a jamadar, and had sought possession of my lands on the ground that they were forfeit, but had not succeeded. And after that he also

had set out to Kashmir with another man, and it was common talk in the village that they went in search of some treasure, for by now Baz Khan had been demobilised.

‘I said, then, that I would return to Kashmir and seek Baz Khan. I had no hope of justice, but I desired to settle; and so, embracing my brother, I departed.’

The Punjabi stopped speaking for an instant, and just at that moment Frank and Dog Bill appeared on the scene.

‘What’s going on?’ queried Frank. ‘I heard you shooting, and when you stopped, I thought you’d be coming back. It’s lunch time.’ Then, I suppose, noting that we were looking rather serious, he continued, ‘Have you found out something about the man of mystery?’

We told him what we had learnt, and he sat down heavily. ‘Phew! Interesting yarn that. Is it finished yet? I suppose the poor devil’s making out the best case for himself, but it’s probably lies.’

Saunders and I were not so sure by then. Of course, Frank hadn’t heard the man speaking, but to us somehow his words had seemed to ring true.

‘Better hear the story out,’ said Saunders. ‘Then we can make up our minds what to do about it. Go on, Gulab Khan, with the end of the tale. Did you find your cousin?’

‘Nay, sahib; but I know that he came this way.’

‘This way? The devil! How did you discover that?’

‘By asking, sahib. I have had many days to seek, and Punjabis are not so common here. Moreover, he had a companion whom I had known, and whom to see was to remember. They were seen nearly two

years ago near Kiris. From there I went towards Skardu and found no trace, and so went back towards Leh, and there also they were not known. Then hearing that the sahibs were coming this way, I besought Rassula, to whom I once did a service, to let me accompany you. That is all. Had the sahib not recognised me, I should have found Baz Khan ere he or I died. But now . . .’ He broke off sullenly.

We looked at each other. The thing was somewhat of a problem. The man was quite likely a murderer, though somehow his story rather fitted with the little traits we had observed. Gulab clearly had some passionate motive, and was not here merely for the sake of fleeing justice. He might, of course, be mad. Still, the tale was queer.

‘What like of man was Baz Khan?’ Frank asked suddenly.

‘Not unlike me, sahib, though darker and somewhat broader. He had a big gash across his chest that he got from a piece of shell.’

‘And the other man whom you say was remarkable to look at? Who was he? Also a soldier?’

‘No, sahib; he was a strange man, in part of Kashmir blood. I think that at one time he had worked as an agent for a political sahib up in Yarkand. I know he had once been a prisoner of the Roos or the Chinese, where he had been flogged, and bore the marks upon his back.’

Frank, next to me, sat up suddenly. He had been lying on one elbow on the slope of pine needles.

‘He had also a long scar upon one cheek, an old scar of a burn. Moreover, he limped when walking from some injury, which also was done when a prisoner. Thus it was easy. . . . The sahib has seen him?’ said Gulab excitedly.

'Yes,' said Frank, taking the pipe out of his mouth. 'I saw a man marked in this way, though I know not if he limped. Was he also pockmarked?'

'Undoubtedly. That I did not say, but he was. But if he did not limp he cannot have been him. He always limped. Did the sahib not remark his limp?'

'No. He was dead when I saw him.'

'Dead? But when? Where? And was Baz Khan with him? A tall man like me, but darker?'

'Over there, on that hill,' replied Frank, pointing with the stem of his pipe. 'He was alone in the snow, dead, though of what I know not.'

Gulab, disregarding Saunders's orders, rose to his feet, and turned to look at the hill Frank had pointed out; and Saunders made no motion towards my pistol.

'If he were there, Baz Khan also will be there.' Gulab turned to us with outstretched hands. 'Sahibs! lend me a gun and give me fourteen days, and I will surely return and go quietly to jail. I have money. I will pay for the ammunition I use. Lo! I will give the money now.' He fumbled at his waistband, and pulled out a little string net containing a few rupees.

'One way of escaping,' said I, though I did not really mean it seriously. Gulab's story rang too true for an invention on the spur of the moment.

'We are a court of inquiry,' said Saunders in his most judicial tone. 'Self-constituted, and entirely irregular, since I am not even a soldier now. But distinctly a court of much local authority.' He dropped the judicial tone. 'What *are* we going to do with him? Send him back? Let him go?'

'Keeping him is an alternative,' I put in.

Frank sucked at his pipe, eyes half closed in thought.

'It all sounds extraordinarily true. I believe it is true,' he said at last. 'What do you think, Everitt?'

'True,' said I. 'I am a creature of impressions, whereas Frank is a logical dealer in facts. But we both seemed to be of the same opinion in this case. What do you think, Saunders?'

'I think with you, true. And if so, we don't seem to be the first people who've come here to look for something. Baz Khan's evidently been here, and, moreover, may be here still. I think his cousin might be of use to us yet. Shall we keep him and forget the rest; anyway, for the present?'

'Yes,' said Frank. 'We've got him pretty well under our thumb. We can track him if he bolts. And if Baz Khan is really here, and if he is the unscrupulous blighter that Gulab makes out, another ex-sepoy, especially one who doesn't love him, might come in handy. Do we give Gulab a run for his money?'

'Yes, under our supervision,' said I. 'We shall have to trust him, though.'

'Quite,' said Frank. 'Half measures are no good with an Indian fighting man, or any fighting man for that matter.'

He turned to Gulab Khan.

'We will not lend you a rifle — *now*. Perhaps later we may want you to take one. Will you come with us and look for Baz Khan? It may be that your cousin sought something that we also have thought of. Will you come, and leave the matter of the jama-dar to wait till we have found Baz Khan?'

'Yes, I will go with the sahibs. But if we find Baz Khan, will the sahibs let me do as I will? The sahibs

do not allow private settlement of wrongs. They always demand papers and ink and witnesses and police.'

'If we find Baz Khan, we will judge between you.'

'I have eaten the sahibs' pay,' said Gulab simply, as though that settled the judgment once and for all. 'I will come.'

'Then,' said Saunders, rising to his feet, 'pick up my rifle and follow us. And clean it properly when we get back, and for the next three days, too.'

'I will get hot water from the cook,' said Gulab, picking up the Mannlicher. 'It should have been done at once while the barrel was still warm, but even so it may serve now.'

He followed us back to camp, and later I saw him sitting outside Saunders's tent cleaning the Mannlicher and crooning to it in Punjabi as if to a baby. He was doubtless a little mad, for that evening also he sharpened the axe again.

CHAPTER VII

WE BRIDGE THE GULF

THE day after we had learnt the story of Gulab Khan's adventures, Frank and Saunders set out, one to each side of the plain, with the object of climbing the hills to ascertain if there was any way of getting round the great falls, or of crossing the ravine where it cut its sinuous way out through the surrounding hills before descending to the long slopes leading back into the lower ground we had passed after leaving the river.

They were away for two days, and Valerie and I rather hoped from their extra long absence — they had originally intended to stop away only the one night — that one or other of them, if not both, had found some means of entrance to the still hidden country which lay beyond the great ravine.

But about midday on the third day Frank returned, only to report that after two days' hard climbing, real mountaineering for the most part, he had failed to find any way up the outer side of the cliffs above the falls, cliffs which, moreover, hid all view of the inner plain from the outside.

And later in the day a very gloomy Saunders rejoined us, having followed the ravine right through the cliffs to the west, where he found that its waters drained into a narrow valley joining another, a stream fed from the snout of a big glacier running down from the western foot of the great peak lying at the extreme corner of the plain. This peak was marked on the map as twenty thousand feet high, and evi-

dently unclimbable to all except a properly equipped Alpine party.

After dinner that night we held a council of war as to our future plans. We had reached Frank's valley, which proved even more interesting than he had originally led us to expect: we had come upon traces of old ruins and a rather intriguing fort-like rock with the site of an old bridge; and then in Gulab Khan's story, which linked the man Frank had found with a vague suggestion of treasure, we had had the most extraordinary confirmation of our original theories that there was something worth finding under those hills in front. And lastly, I think all of us felt that we could not possibly go home without meeting Baz Khan, who had suddenly assumed such a large share of the general mystery which hung about Frank's discovery.

'There's only one thing to do now,' said Frank at last. 'We've got to replace the old bridge. I had another look at the gap on my way back to-day, and as far as one could gauge — I've a fairly accurate eye for measurements — it's not much over twenty-one feet. With the rope we've got, I think we could get a couple of pine trees across, and then make a rough bridge. It'll take us two or three days, but it can be done. I've made similar bridges in Chamba, though I've not made one over such a big drop, or with such a cramped take-off.'

We agreed that if we wanted to get across to the opposite side of the ravine, this was the only solution, though it would not be too easy a task. The mere carrying of the trees there — there were none nearer to the ravine than the wood we were camped in — would be a formidable job. And then the getting of them up the narrow ledge in the face of the

rock and the final swinging them out across the gap would be harder still.

‘But the first essential,’ went on Frank after we had agreed to the main scheme, ‘is to get up to the top of the rock. We could do far better if there was some place higher up where we could let down ropes and up-end our beams on the platform by hauling from above, and then swing them out across the gap. In fact, if we can’t do that, I doubt our ever getting them across at all.’

‘Which means a subsidiary bridging operation to get across the missing bit of the stair,’ said Saunders.

‘Exactly. But that’s easier, of course. The gap there is only about eleven feet, and there are some projections in the wall, and also we should be working in the length of the path, so that we could launch our logs far more easily.’

‘And, of course, once at the top of the pinnacle we may be able to see something of what’s across the ravine,’ remarked Valerie.

So next morning, after selecting three suitable trees which Saunders was to have felled by the Indians, Frank went off to the pinnacle rock to make some more detailed measurements. By the time he returned, the pines had been felled and trimmed, and we had two sixteen-foot logs, while our men were busy making up bundles of the thicker branches, which would serve as cross-pieces to carry a footway between the two logs when the tree trunks were in position over the gap.

It took us three journeys to get all our material into position, two days’ hard work and then part of another day to make our various preparations on the site of the old bridge, and it was not until the fourth morning that we actually commenced the bridging

operations over the gap in the pathway to the top of the pinnacle.

Then came the great instant when we launched our first tree trunk across the gap. It was an anxious moment as the log began to slide past its balancing point, its nose kept from sinking too low by the rope which ran back from it over a shoulder of rock somewhat above us.

We had four men on that rope, and even so it looked for one moment as if they might be pulled off their feet. At last, however, the wavering nose of the log butted into the opposite side of the pathway, and as the men on the rope pulled their last ounce, the point lifted slowly upwards, the rest of us gave it another push, until a couple of feet of it slid forward on the ledge opposite, and we had one log in position.

We bound it firmly at our end, and then Rassula — who seemed to have the flies' gift of clinging on to practically nothing — volunteered to cross if we would tie a rope round him in case he should slip. I would not have cared to risk the crossing myself, although with the rope he could only drop some ten feet at most. But there was only the sheer drop to the boiling torrent below him; and although we had bound the log down as well as we could, the free end might slip when he began to move on it. Still he was the lightest of us and the most sure-footed, so after some discussion we let him go. However, the task was not so hard as it looked at first, since there were places in the wall that gave sufficient finger grip to steady one, and Rassula crossed without accident.

Once there he squatted down, so that he could take the strain on the rope if the next man slipped in crossing, and then Frank and Lal Singh followed. Then we ran the second log across, a much easier

task now, since Frank and the two men were able to guide it over by the rope we tied to its leading end and passed over to them.

As soon as the two logs were in position, leaving Saunders in charge on the platform, I crossed the logs, for I had a keen desire to see what view was to be got from the top.

Frank and I followed the ledge round the rock, making nearly a complete circle ere we came out on to the flat top. Our first sensation was one of disappointment, for we were still not quite high enough to see across the ridge opposite.

But if we did not get the view we had hoped for, we found other compensations; for there was now no question of the original purpose served by the rock. The flat top had at one time unquestionably been a fort, for it was still surrounded by stone walls. They were much crumbled, but parts of them were still nearly three or four feet high, though in other places only a foot or so of very weathered stonework remained. In the centre of the open crest, which measured some sixty feet across, was a solid mound of stone, which had evidently once been the base of a watch tower. When the tower — the *débris* of which still lay about, weathered timbers and rough-hewn stones — had been in place, it must undoubtedly have given a view over the ridge opposite, assuming it to have been, say, twenty feet high; but in its present condition, even when standing on the ruined base, we were still unable to see anything of the plain which presumably lay beyond the ridge.

To one side of the old tower base was a narrow passage running down into the heart of the rock, which we followed into the darkness by the aid of an electric-torch. It led to some rock-hewn cellars, which may

once have been storerooms, though the deep dust and evil-smelling dirt which littered them gave little indication as to their actual purpose. There were also two rock-hewn tanks, which had once held a supply of water, presumably carried up by hand, for there was no sign of any spring to fill them.

We decided that later on we would dig out those storerooms, in the hope of finding something which might give a clue as to who the original occupants were. There might be an old paper or two, a broken weapon, bits of old garments, coins — anything of that sort would help us in making some kind of theory to account for the place.

When we got back down the stair we found the second log firmly bound down into place, and then we broke off for lunch. The afternoon was spent in building the footway of the bridge, made up of cross-pieces of smaller branches covered with closely-twisted small twigs and clusters of pine needles, which packed into a fairly solid bed. As last refinement we put a hand rope on the outer side.

Valerie and Saunders joined us then, and we made another journey of exploration to the old buildings on top. They were not very satisfactory to examine, for there was nothing to enable us to assign a date to them. They might have been a hundred years old; they might have been abandoned for five hundred years for all that we could tell.

But when we got down to the bridge again we found Lal Singh lying on the platform with Frank's glasses, looking at the ridge opposite. The rest of the men were already on their way down with their tools and such rope as had not actually been used.

'What are you looking at, Lal Singh?' said I.
'Some shikar?'

'No, sahib. Just now there was something moved by those stones there. I thought it was a jackal at first. I didn't see it properly; it was something in the shadow. But when I got the glasses and looked, it seemed to me that it was a man's head. Then it vanished, and I haven't seen it since. Are there villages that side? Perhaps there's some way up the mountains from the other side, for nobody could live there all the winter.'

We were all pretty excited at this, and one after another got down with the glasses, until the fast-fading light warned us that we had better hurry along back to camp. But we saw nothing that even by the wildest stretch of imagination could be construed as a human being, or any living being for that matter.

But looking back at the ridge, still light although we ourselves were now in the shadow, I felt rather creepy for some reason. The idea of any one lying there watching us in a place where, as far as we could ascertain, no one could be unless they lived there permanently was uncanny, when, as we knew, the whole place must be snow buried for months at a time.

Although we felt convinced that there would be something to find on the other side, even now we could hardly bring ourselves to the idea of men living there permanently. I think if closely questioned we might have admitted that we expected to find ruins, possibly even old mine workings, perhaps some traces of Baz Khan, probably his bones.

'I fancy what happened was that he and the man Frank found crossed there in the early spring when there was a snow bridge formed over the ravine. There might even have been one across the top of the fall somewhere. He and the pockmarked man

were coming away, and something killed the other fellow, or else he died. Seeing Frank's party, Baz Khan promptly hid, and during the night came down to the body again before making off,' said Saunders rather unconvincingly.

'But the tracks led back again,' objected Frank. 'Back again towards those high cliffs, although I hadn't time to follow them very far. But I fancy if I'd had time to make a cast round I'd have picked them up again.'

'And then have found that they doubled round to lead back to the pass, and so down to the villages.'

'Where I should certainly have heard if any stranger had passed,' said Frank logically.

'That's so,' admitted Saunders. 'But he might have been keeping out of the way lest you or your people should see him. If he'd found some rubies, for instance, he mightn't want to bump into any one.'

'But he'd have to get food, anyway.' Frank has what Adrian Brown calls a 'severely logical mind.' 'He couldn't hide all the way from here to Srinagar. And why should he want to hide?'

'Conscience makes cowards, or whatever it is the poet says,' retorted Saunders. 'According to Gulab he is an unmitigated blighter.'

'Or Gulab is, which is about as likely,' said Frank.

'I know that. But what's the alternative to my theory? That there are people, or a man, living year in year out on the other side of that ravine, unable to get out, since we can't get in. The place must be always cramped and hopelessly snowbound from about the end of October to the beginning of May. The opposite side of it is the main Muztagh chain, where we know there are no passes — nothing but

glaciers and devilish big peaks. What are we to make of it?’

‘It’s easier to think of a lost village than a single man living there for a couple of years on end,’ put in Valerie. ‘One man couldn’t have taken food there for himself for all that time.’

‘I know, Miss Weston. I’m only trying to make reasonable explanations for a most unreasonable set of data. Lost villages only occur in story-books.’

‘But there was that case in America not so long ago,’ objected Valerie. ‘They’d been cut off for ever so long, and remained quite Elizabethan. And most unpleasant some of their customs were found to be, too. But they were quite genuine, and a folk-lore expert hurried over by the next boat and collected a whole lot of early English folk-songs hitherto only known in England in fragmentary form. And if that can happen in America, with all its telephones and such-like space-eliminating gadgets, why not in Baltistan, which is very many degrees less opened up?’

And there we left it for the night. All the theories were obviously absurd. Still, the definite facts were, on the face of them, even more queer than the theories we advanced to account for them. But we were getting more and more anxious to cross that ravine and see what lay on the other side.

Frank didn’t spare us for the next few days. The felling and trimming and transporting of sufficient timber and light branches to bridge the ravine was hard work. We had to send Rassula down into the main valley to buy some more rope for us and to get us some fowls and a couple more sheep. He was away six days, and on his return brought us further stories of the local people’s dislike to our valley and their reluctance to come up it. He thought we might have

trouble if we wanted to shift camp later, except perhaps just to get us back over the pass, when with sufficient backsheesh we could doubtless get the same men as before. But he was sure none of them could be induced to go any farther into the mountains.

Finally, all our material being in position, we made an early start one morning, so as to get the longest day we could on the actual job of building the bridge across the enormously deep ravine which separated us from those tantalising hills that we looked at day after day. It was essential that it should be a windless morning, for the air currents down the ravine from the high hills on our right were quite strong enough to stop all work; indeed, to make it sometimes anything but safe even to be upon the unfenced ledge round the pinnacle. But our luck held, for on the morning we started out to make our bridge there was no breath of air as we left camp, and the weather looked like holding all day.

Owing to the smallness of the platform on which we had to work we could only get up a limited amount of gear at a time. Had it not been for the rock-cut recess in the rear face, I doubt if we should ever have succeeded in our task at all. We had to get up our two great twenty-six-foot pine trunks along the winding ledge, a matter anything but easy, since either the front or the rear end always seemed to be projecting over the drop, so that a careless movement of those behind might sweep off some one in front, or *vice versa*.

And when we had got into the straight piece of the ledge, those long baulks had to be lifted up on end and swung out across the ravine, and if a strong wind sprang up during this part of the programme, probably the whole lot would be swept out of our

hands, and we should be lucky if none of our party followed them.

It was hard work indeed, but in the end we got the first tree trunk upright, pulling it up with ropes let down from above by Saunders and his party, who had gone right up to the top of the pinnacle by the old fort. Then came the still more difficult operation of launching the great log out into space by letting it fall slowly forward towards the opposite bank, steering it by ropes on either side held by two men, each under my direction, Frank superintending the whole show.

The pine swung gradually out into the gulf, down slowly and down again as the party above paid out their rope in response to Frank's hails, and we below braced ourselves against the sudden strains on the two guiding ropes as the heavy timber wavered now this way, now that. I for one tried to forget that I was balancing on a three-foot ledge over a hundred and fifty feet drop, restraining a piece of inanimate wood that might have had fifty most animate devils in it by the way it plunged and heaved upon occasion.

But the windless day helped us; our ropes stood the strain, and the end of the baulk dropped nearer and nearer to the flat rock point opposite until the log sank slowly into place, forming a perilous bridge across the ravine. It had seemed a giant of a tree when we were trying to carry it up the ledge on the side of the pinnacle rock, but now it looked too frail for words.

We had trimmed that tree trunk as smooth as we could with a very definite purpose, for tied with thin twine about its centre was a large hoop made up of two pieces of wood with hollowed grooves on their outer edges, in which were strong rope lashings cap-

able of taking more than the weight of a man, and to this hoop was fastened a rope, the end of which Frank was holding. As soon as the log had fallen securely in place, he gave a sharp tug at his rope, snapping the twine, which so far had held the hoop out of harm's way in the middle of the tree, and hauled the hoop over our side, slipping it easily along the smoothed log.

With Lal Singh's aid Rassula fastened a rope about his waist, lashed the other end to the hoop, and then, clinging to the tree trunk with hands and naked feet, pushed out into space across the gulf, head downwards, and in another minute was scrambling to his feet on the rock opposite. Then untying the spare length of rope he had taken looped about his waist, he fastened it to the hoop, and shouted to us to haul it back again to our side, paying out his own rope as we did so.

A coolie went across after that, and I suppose if you are born and bred to crossing chasms on loops of willow suspended fly-like upside-down on your back from a swaying tree trunk in mid-air a hundred feet above a roaring torrent, you don't mind the job. All the rubies in Asia wouldn't tempt me to do it.

And then, of course, Frank went. He's the sort of person who would. But he went, white man like, sitting himself across the log with his feet dangling in space and his lifebelt in the shape of the hoop trailing after him. Then we pushed them across some tools and pegs in a bundle tied on to the sliding hoop, and while the rest of us were getting the second tree trunk into position, they secured the farther end of the one already there.

They had to come back again to help us launch the second beam, but by two o'clock we had both

logs in position, and felt that we had earned our mid-day meal, for which Frank gave us a very reluctant half hour.

Then we had to get down to building up the bridge, in the same way as we had the smaller one across the gap in the ledge. By sending across several loads of stuff on the hoop we were able to work from both ends, so that by five o'clock we had a bridge that you could walk across on your feet with the aid of the guide-ropes, which we stretched on each side. But when we all made our state crossing, I think most of us kept our eyes very resolutely fixed on the farther bank.

It was too late now to attempt any exploration that evening, and all we could do was to climb to the top of the ridge above the narrow pass that ran through it — a pass similar to the one we had come through when we first entered the plain, but which Saunders pronounced as clearly having been made by the hand of man, probably by improving a natural depression.

Here again were ruins, relics of a tower, part of which was still standing on the opposite side of the rocky ridge, and round it the relics of stone floors of two more buildings.

We didn't stop to examine them then; what we wanted was a view of the ground ahead, and so we pushed on to the highest point.

I have seen many gloomy landscapes, grey, lifeless deserts, barren valleys, rock-walled tangis of the frontier, but I don't think I have ever seen anything so desolate-looking as the country that opened before us as we reached the top.

Some three miles away from us lay the lowest of the snow slopes of the great mountains, which went

up sheer into the most fantastic collection of peaks I have ever seen: gaunt pinnacles of rock shooting out of snow slopes; snow-covered peaks based on great banks of grey ice; smaller humped peaks, partly ice, partly rock; narrow, boulder-strewn valleys, probably glacial moraines.

There were four to five miles of peaks joining on either hand the side walls of the plain we were in, the surrounding cliffs climbing higher and higher to join the great massif closing the plain at the far end under the immense peaks we had seen from far off.

And the intervening three miles of distance was broken country, full of deep ravines, boulder-covered patches of ground, tumbled with great grey and black rocks, cut up by little winding streams fed from the snows above, showing at rare intervals little patches of sparse turf, and a few clumps of stunted birch trees at the higher end.

About two miles away, and rather to our right on somewhat higher ground than the rest of the plain, lay a mountain lake, which by the look of it seemed to have some slight traces of vegetation about it.

With the growing shadows and the fast-sinking sun it looked ghost-like and desolate, and a cold wind springing up added to one's sense of discomfort, a discomfort somehow not purely physical.

We scanned the broken plain ahead with our glasses, but no sign of life was to be seen anywhere save for some little dots on the lower hills beyond the lake, the first ground to show traces of snow. Frank opined that they were ibex, but I think that at that distance, with only a pair of six-magnification glasses, he was for once drawing upon his imagination. That they were animals of sorts was clear,

since they changed their position as we watched, moving farther up to our right.

'A weird-looking place, isn't it?' said Saunders as he put his glasses back into the case. 'I think for the moment our present camp site is preferable.'

'Very much preferable,' said Valerie, folding her lorgnettes.

And with that we turned down the slope, made our way back across the bridge and down to the foot of the pinnacle, where the rest of our party were just picking up their loads preparatory to starting home. I was the last down the pinnacle except for Rassula, who was just behind me.

'Why did the sahib say those were ibex?' he queried, as I stopped at a turn to let Dog Bill get on.

'I suppose he thought they were,' replied I. 'What did you make them out to be?'

'Not ibex, sahib. Certainly not ibex. I have seen too many not to know.'

Knowing the telescopic power of the hillman's eyes, I thought that Rassula was more likely to be right, even with his naked eye, than any of us with glasses.

'They moved more like goats,' said he hesitatingly. 'Like goats,' he continued. 'But how could there be goats there?'

Then seeing that I was interested he went on rather more boldly —

'Sahib; this is a bad place, I think. The sahib knows I am not afraid. I am not like some who talk always of their courage, goat-hearted ones who have to speak of it since none else see it. But I am afraid of this place. I do not mind what the villagers below said. They are mostly foolish and of little knowledge. I who have followed sahibs since I was that high' —

he held out his hand — ‘I do not fear the mountains or the high snows, nor the valleys. But of this place I am afraid.’

‘What are you afraid of, Rassula?’ We had dropped a little behind the others. ‘Have you heard anything of bad report of this plain?’

‘I have heard the usual foolish devil stories of the villagers and the Gujars, which I have heard many times in many places. Of this place they know nothing, though they talked one evening when I was down there. Of snowmen, and *bhuts*, and suchlike, children’s talk. No; but I, too, am like a child to-night. I am afraid, but of what I know not. I was afraid when I stood first on the farther side while we were building the bridge. I desired greatly to look behind me frequently, and yet felt that should I do so I should see nothing.’

He was silent for a space. Then he looked back at the great peaks behind, their summits crimson with the last rays of the sun, already hidden by the hills to our right.

‘They are like blood, now, sahib. Allah send it be not an omen for us. But the kismet of the sahibs is great.’

For Rassula it was a long speech, and one that came back often to my mind in the days that followed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INNERMOST VALLEY

WHATEVER reflections Rassula's words may have brought to my mind as twilight fell the previous evening, the next day, when Saunders and I with our following of coolies crossed the narrow bridge over the ravine, there seemed nothing eerie about the landscape. A cloudless sky of blue, the great snow-peaks ahead dazzling white in the late May sunshine, the pleasant noise of rushing water in our ears, and the haunting mystery of untried ground ahead, all combined to make up a thoroughly attractive morning.

Ahead of us on the ridge was Karima, talking to Gobind Singh and Fateh Khan, while our three coolies made their slow way up the steep incline, heavily laden with camp gear, for we were taking enough kit to allow one or both of us to camp out for a day or two if need be. Just behind us stood Gulab Khan, carrying Saunders's shot-gun and his double-express, his inseparable companion, the axe in his hand as he gazed out towards the mountains in front, where perhaps he might yet come face to face with the man who, according to him, had sought his life in such dastardly fashion.

In view of the long distance from our camp to the peaks, we had decided that it would be better to make a preliminary reconnaissance, and as I had stopped behind last time, for this trip Frank remained in camp, or rather in the vicinity of camp, since with Rassula he intended to spend the day following up the trail of the leopards, whose pugs were

to be seen most mornings near the spring, though so far we had failed to catch a glimpse of the beasts, and our daily labours had left us small inclination to sit up at night in the vague hope of a shot.

Saunders and I were to explore up towards the mountains, and if we found any site that might be suitable and anything that looked as if it would repay methodical exploration, we intended to move our whole party forward and set up a new camp from which to work.

'We should look rather mugs if some one upset that bridge,' said Saunders to me as we climbed the ridge. 'There's hardly any rope left now, and it'd be the devil's own job to get up another bridge with half of us on either side.'

'Well, it's not likely to happen unless we find the mythical Baz Khan, and he doesn't happen to like our faces.'

'I've a sort of idea we shall find him somehow or other,' replied Saunders. 'It's an illogical kind of feeling, since we've proved to our satisfaction that no one could possibly live up here in the winter, and there seems no way across the ravine. I ought to be feeling that the gentleman is really back in India, or else dead in a snowdrift like the fellow Frank found, but somehow I don't. I expect that Gulab's infected me with his ideas.' He broke off with a short laugh as we crossed the divide, and set on down the farther slope into the barren broken plain we had looked over the day before.

The going was bad, owing to the large number of ravines which intersected the plain, and twice we had to go back on our tracks in order to seek some lower ground where we could get across the chasms we came upon. The whole place looked rather like

the dried mud bed of a pond, with the cracks magnified a thousand times.

‘Earthquake action at some time, I should think,’ I remarked to Saunders, who agreed that something more than mere water action was necessary to account for the great rifts across which we had to make our way, and which delayed us so considerably that it was after midday that we found ourselves on the higher slope close under the actual foot of the hills.

We lunched by a little spring, and then, leaving our laden coolies, moved along the base of the cliffs to find a suitable camp site, and also some valley which would enable us to work our way farther into the hills, for where the slopes were hardly climbable, and certainly impassable for laden men.

But it was not till we got close to the lake we had seen the evening before that we found the cliffs getting lower. They were not very high at any point, but they were very much undercut, and for the best part of the two miles we had followed them, making our slow, painful way over the tumbled boulders that lay heaped along their feet, we had met no ravine which offered any way up.

The lake was a pleasant change to the country we had hitherto traversed, for its banks were edged with a certain amount of turf and rushes, and as we approached, a flight of duck circled up from the water and passed over our heads.

We followed the edge of the lake for nearly a mile, until suddenly at the far end we came upon a big ravine leading into the hills, evidently the channel down which the waters from the melting snows above us fed the lake, which lay in a slight depression, and clearly drained itself when over-full by a long winding ravine leading away towards the corner near the

falls. I had noted a big watercourse running in that side on the day when we first found the big falls, but, like all those we had seen, it ended in a cascade falling into the main stream, and offered no road even had we found a corresponding depression on our own side.

'That's where we get in,' said Saunders, pointing. 'We might do worse than camp here to-night. We can have a whack at those duck later. They're possibly not over-accustomed to guns, and may not fly high at first. Meantime we'll tell Gobind to bring up the coolies.'

We sent the Sikh back, and the rest of us entered the ravine. It was a narrow, boulder-strewn road, and we had some difficulty in following it, since the snow was now melting fast, and for the greater part of our way the ravine was a torrent of grey snow water, along the edges of which we made our precarious way, slipping sometimes into the icy stream.

But eventually, through the narrowest of rock-bound passes, we made our way out above the foaming torrent, and emerged into a sort of natural amphitheatre, perhaps two miles across, walled by the most stupendous cliffs, whose upper ledges were banked with streaks and patches of snow. But most wonderful of all, the amphitheatre was divided up into little fields, or what looked like fields, with just the first faint touches of green of newly sprouting crops.

We stopped suddenly. There, in the heart of the most extraordinary desolation, right under the immense mountains, in a narrow cul-de-sac of a place, which for half the year must be buried in snow, in an altitude of well over ten thousand feet, were fields. We rubbed our eyes and looked again, and wondered

if we were dreaming. But there was no getting away from those little terraces, and the rippling water channels that ran between them. And not a soul in sight! No vestige of tree or hut or anything that might mark human habitations. Just the little fields, unmistakably carefully cultivated and tended.

'Well, I'm jiggered!' said Saunders. 'What on earth have we bumped on now?'

And I certainly had no answer for him, nor had either Karima or Gulab Khan, as we stood there looking at the utterly unexpected sight. Saunders took off his puttoo hat, a sure sign of being perplexed, put it on again, fished for his cigarette-case, and lighted a cigarette. Then he sat down on a rock and considered the fields.

'Where the devil do the owners live?' said he at last, voicing all our thoughts.

'Possibly in caves,' said I at last. 'Like the Mahsuds. There's not a damned hut in view anywhere. And why aren't any of them about? There's not a soul to be seen in the whole blooming valley.' I joined him on the rock, and cadged a cigarette.

'Perhaps they saw us coming, and, not being accustomed to strangers, did a bolt.'

'Possible, but unlikely, since we must have been completely hidden in the ravine coming up from the lake, and I'll swear there's no one moved since we came in,' said I.

'Well, let's go and have a look see.' Saunders got to his feet and took his rifle from Gulab Khan.

We made a complete detour of the fields, which covered perhaps half a mile of ground, but found no one, though at the point nearest the mountains we came upon a well-worn track leading up to the heights above.

'They're somewhere up there, obviously,' said I. 'I wonder who they are and what they're like?'

'Sahib! sahib! Look there!' called Karima, pointing excitedly at the cliff above us.

We turned quickly, but all we saw was a goat high above us on the edge of a precipitous drop. But it was the most unmistakable and goat-like goat, and goats don't grow wild as a rule; not that kind of goat, anyway. Goats always mean men somewhere near.

'Shall we follow up the path and see?' queried Saunders.

'A bit late now, and we've got to get camp fixed up. I think we'd better make our way back to the lake now, and leave the exploring part until to-morrow,' said I.

And on that we retraced our steps down the ravine to the edge of the lake, where we found Gobind Singh busy with the coolies getting up camp; in other words, laying out our bedding rolls, and pitching the tiny bivouac tent which we had brought in case of bad weather.

We sat up very late that night arguing out all sorts of theories to account for what we had seen.

'They must be more or less like dormice if they manage to live up here all the winter. They could only do it by keeping underground somewhere.'

'Yes,' said I. 'It sounds as if we were going to find some old mine workings. You could live in places like that where the temperature would be much the same all the year round; but who the devil can they be?'

We went to bed still pondering the point, and next morning when we set out again had no more satisfactory conclusion than when we went to bed.

But it was after we had passed the fields that we

came upon our first trace of the strange people of that forgotten valley. It was just on the edge of a little brook, the farthest point we had reached the previous day, when Karima attracted my attention. He was standing by a patch of damp mud considering the marks on it, our footprints of the previous day. There was the rough impress of his own grass shoes, and the clearer print of my nailed chaplis, but clean across one of these latter was the unmistakable track of a bare foot, a small bare foot; and none of our people were barefooted, not even the coolies, and, anyway, they hadn't come with us.

Clearly some one had been there during the night. The ground on either side was too hard to show any tracks; it was only in that one damp patch that we saw this mark. It was rather weird in that little valley with its fields, to-day again, like yesterday, utterly void of life. So far we had not even seen the goat we had observed the day before.

We followed down the steep path, which after a while ran into a winding water-course, now this side of the little stream, now that, and presently once again we came upon those bare footmarks running both ways here, as though some one had descended the path and then returned later, for in one place the ascending tracks overlay the descending ones.

We must have gone up well over a thousand feet when the ravine closed in upon us very suddenly in a narrow rift, where the sun obviously never penetrated, for there was snow still lying there, dirty trodden snow, as though the path was much used at times.

And just at the narrowest coldest corner we came upon the most uncanny thing I have ever seen in the course of many wanderings. In the side wall was a

deep cleft partly filled by a great block of ice, the product probably of many years' packed snow.

But the centre of the ice seemed to have been cleared and smoothed rather like a window, and this attracted our attention, so that we stepped into the cleft to examine it. Karima, the first to enter, bolted out again with a yell, evidently very frightened at what he had seen. But when I entered I didn't blame him. It was enough to scare any one, more particularly in that ghostly gorge.

For visible through the ice, which looked like rather dirty glass, veined and streaked and opaque in parts, was the figure of a man apparently standing there.

'Good Lord, Saunders, come and look at this!' I shouted, as I bent closer to see through the ice.

I heard Saunders suck in his breath as he looked over my shoulder at the still figure, screened behind the semi-transparent wall that had kept it there through heaven only knows how many years.

It was a tallish man, clothed in what was apparently the remains of a loose cotton shirt and rather tight trousers, with dark suggestive stains upon them. He was bareheaded and bearded, but his features were difficult to see, for the ice there was more opaque than elsewhere. But that was probably as well, since his arms showed very clearly through cleaner patches of ice, and there was no getting away from the fact that below the elbows the sleeves seemed to have charred away, the arms changed to black shapeless masses, while still projecting from the gaunt chest which showed through the torn shirt was a long rusty iron spike.

'Poor devil!' said Saunders softly. 'Poor devil! By the look of him they made a mess of him before

they finished him. I wonder who he was and how long he's been there?'

'Look! What you can see of his left foot seems to be much like his hands, too.'

I pointed to such as we could see of the left leg; the right one seemed missing below the knee.

'I wonder if we've bumped on Baz Khan?' queried Saunders.

But Gulab insisted that he would know Baz Khan even in his own particular residence in hell, however burnt he might get. The man was not his cousin; of that he was sure.

'Looks as if they'd put him in a slow fire bit by bit,' said Saunders. 'I wonder when and why?'

'Perhaps this was a slave-worked mine, and he was one of the slaves,' I suggested.

'Or perhaps he was one of the guards who got left here when the place broke up,' remarked Saunders thoughtfully. 'But either way, on these suppositions he must have been here about a hundred years. Good Lord, think of it!'

'People have eaten frozen mammoth in Siberia after thousands of years. I suppose things keep indefinitely on ice, don't they? But I'm getting doubtful about the owners of the fields if this is one of their productions.'

I backed out of the cleft, Saunders following, and we kept our guns rather handy after that episode.

Once out of the narrow gorge we came under another cliff, up which the path led on a narrow ledge, up and up until we finally emerged under a still steeper face, and there high above us were unmistakable holes in the wall.

'Caves! You're right,' said I.

'Caves . . . or else old mine workings,' corrected

Saunders. 'And I rather think the latter. They look too regular for natural caves. And now what do we do? There doesn't seem to be a blinking soul about anywhere.'

'We take up a strategic position on those rocks there, where we can slip away back down the path quickly if need be, and then we start making a noise to attract the inhabitants,' said I. 'But first, just in case of accidents, we load up. Fateh Khan and Gulab had better have the shot-guns. I've got half a dozen lethal bullets in my haversack.' I had my beloved .303, while Saunders was carrying his double express, which he had taken from Gulab after our find of the ice-buried man.

We established ourselves in the rocks where our path had run out on to the narrow plateau, perhaps three hundred yards long under the great cliff face. I could see that Karima was not too happy, though he was evidently determined to put a stout face on things. For a Kashmiri he was remarkably plucky, but he had not the real steady courage that was such a salient feature of his uncle's character. A few glimpses of the Kashmiri in anything approaching a suggestion of danger makes you understand why 'son of a Kashmiri mother' is one of the greatest terms of abuse among Punjabis, and make you realise why it is that for centuries the native Kashmiri has been ruled by outside people, Afghans, Sikhs, and nowadays, Dogras. They are a wonderful example of the inevitable fate of all people who lack, or let decay, the primitive fighting qualities which alone entitle a man to predominance over the beasts or to equality among his fellow-men. Frank has a great scheme for their moral regeneration. It is to consist of a system of fines to be paid by any one who

is hammered by any one else, 10 per cent to Government, and the balance to the aggressor. He says in twenty years you could make men out of them by that process, for physically they are magnificent specimens, and in sheer brawn any Kashmiri should be a match for three of the Dogras who rule them. But then the Dogra has always borne the epithet 'lion-hearted.'

Then we proceeded to make noises, hailing the caves above in every known tongue — Punjabi, Hindustani, Kashmiri, and Balti, the last two contributed by Karima. But no answering sound came back from those dark holes above us, too high to be reached by the stones which the energetic Gulab flung up in the intervals of his hails to Baz Khan to come out. Like all people obsessed by one particular idea, he could not get away from the *idée fixe* that his cousin was hidden somewhere above in those caves to which there was apparently no way up. Presumably the inhabitants had ropes or ladders of sorts.

'I wonder if a shot would draw them?' suggested Saunders.

'It might. On the other hand, it might merely make them nasty, which is the last thing we want. A better line would be to wait here a bit. Later on they may show themselves.'

'All right. Then meantime I'm going to hunt around under the foot of that cliff. Smells like a parrot's cage though. The Punjabis can keep a lookout on the caves and shout to us if anything moves.'

So leaving the Sikh and Fateh Khan to watch, the rest of us went out into the open below the cliffs. There was no question about the place being occupied. The smell alone would have told one that, and

the ground was littered with a mass of decaying forage, *débris* of garnered crops, unmistakable goat droppings, and other filth of all sorts, for the narrow plateau clearly formed a sort of midden for the caves above.

The discovery of a rough threshing floor, evidently not used since the previous year, with the crudest of rough-plaited winnowing scoops and a hank of coarse rope evidently twisted out of rushes from the lake below, were the only finds of definite human handiwork. Both were cruder than any of their kind I have seen before. The inhabitants would appear to be of even lower type than the Baltis of the valleys below.

A more interesting discovery was the find by Saunders of some entrances into the cliff, rough-hewn tunnels, now blocked with great piles of heavy stones, partly hidden by the accumulated evil-smelling *débris* from the caves above. With the aid of a couple of pieces of wood found near by, we cleared away some of the dirt covering one of them, but it was clear that they had not been used for many years, and a good deal of time and labour and tools would have been necessary to open them up.

In raking out this *débris* I came upon the rusty remains of a spear-head with a few inches of rotting black shaft attached to it. We were considering this evidence of some previous military occupation when we heard Gobind Singh's loud hail to look out, and then his quick 'Bacho, sahib! Bacho!'

We 'bachoed' under the face of the cliff only just in time, as a large jagged rock, followed by two or three smaller ones, crashed down dully into the sodden *débris* about us, and then we fled across the open in most unceremonious haste.

'What the devil was that?' panted Saunders as we reached the men. 'A slide?'

But the Sikh said that the stones had fallen from the cave above, though he had seen no one there before. He had just caught a faint movement, and called to us to look out, and then he saw the stones and shouted to us to dodge.

'Nasty unpleasant people!' remarked Saunders, taking his glasses from Karima. 'They don't like strangers evidently. Which cave was it?' This last remark was in the vernacular to Gobind, and the Sikh pointed out the one whence the stones had fallen.

We lay there a bit watching the caves with our glasses, but there was no further movement to be seen.

'I'm getting tired of this,' I remarked eventually when an hour had passed and nothing been seen. 'Can't we draw them somehow or other?' I looked back down the path we had come. With a little care a man might work up close into the rock without being seen from the caves, practically right up to the point where we now lay.

'Tell you what,' I continued. 'Let's go away very obviously as though we were fed up with trying to attract their attention. Then when we're out of sight round the corner, you and I will crawl back, keeping under cover until we can see the caves again. They might come out then and let us get a look at them.'

'Not a bad egg,' replied Saunders. 'I'd like to have a view of the creatures.'

We hailed the caves a few more times, and then, as though tired of the amusement, got to our feet and went back down the path. But once out of sight

round the corner we bade the men keep there out of sight, while Saunders and I stalked our way most carefully back. It was a slow process, for we had to make ourselves very small indeed, and the rocks seemed to be most excruciatingly sharp and pointed just in the particular places where one's hands or knees had to go.

But the stratagem paid us. We slipped into place behind a big boulder, and, cautiously craning round the shaded side of it, I saw framed in the black entrance to the cave whence the stones had fallen a human figure.

The creature — whether man or woman was hard to say — was naked, save for a sort of ragged apron about its loins. Its long, colourless, matted hair hung down over its shoulders and half way over the chest. By the absence of hair about the mouth I took it to be a woman. It seemed incredibly old and wizened, with stringy arms and legs and indescribably grimy, wrinkled skin. It blinked, too, in the strong sunlight as it squatted there for all the world like a white ape.

By the pallid skin the thing was evidently not accustomed to strong sunlight, and as it looked out towards us it shaded its eyes with one skinny hand. But the movement of the hand showed something more, a sudden red flash as something at the wrist caught the sun, and when the red flash had gone again, I saw that there was what looked like a leather band bound round the arm.

I moved back to let Saunders have a glance, and then Gulab, away down the path behind us, spoilt our chance. In his desire to get a glimpse of the cave-dwellers, probably in the hope of seeing his cousin, he showed himself, and the thing evidently saw him,

for with a weird whistling call it spun round and scuttled away into the darkness.

'Damn!' said Saunders, who had only caught that fleeting glimpse. 'What made it do that?'

'Gulab!' said I, looking back and shouting to the Punjabi to get out of sight. 'That probably scared them for some time. We won't see anything more yet awhile. But did you see it?'

'Only for a fraction of a second. It might have been a monkey as easily as a man. What was it like?'

I described it in detail, saving my titbit about the red thing for the last.

'There's no question now where Frank's amulet came from,' said I as I finished. 'Long 'un, we're going to find things all right.'

'Yes. When we can find a way of getting the creatures to come out into the sunlight. They seem more than a trifle shy. I wonder if they're dangerous.'

'Hardly. And, anyway, they can't have any guns. They're probably some kind of aboriginal cave-dwellers.'

'Aboriginal cave-dwellers be damned! Why the bridge? Why the towers? No. They're cave-dwellers all right now. But I don't believe in the aboriginal theory. We may find some interesting traces of the past once we can get inside there. But first of all we've got to tame the animals, make 'em feed out of our hands, so to speak. I wonder what bait we can use?' He took off his hat and considered it.

'Anyway, we may as well go home now and have a meal. It's getting late and I'm hungry, and they aren't coming out again now that that fool Gulab has queered the pitch. Damn his neck!'

Gulab was most apologetic when we rounded on

him, but that didn't help us in the least, and we said so very crossly as we followed the path back to the fields and then on to our little camp by the lake.

We decided that I should go back to our main camp, and bring up Frank and Valerie next day to see the strange place we had found.

'I'm going to stop here and spend my time nosing round in the hope of getting a look at them. I want to examine the rocks, too,' said Saunders. 'They didn't look much as if they had minerals in them, but one can never tell without close examination. You had better take two of the coolies with you in case we decide to bring our whole camp on later, and they're no use to me here. Just leave me one to collect fuel and so on. I'll make shift on what Gobind or Gulab can turn out in the way of food for a day or two.'

So that afternoon, when Saunders, taking Gulab with him, went up the ravine again, I set out back to camp, taking Karima, two of the coolies, and, of course, Fateh Khan with me, but, being nervous about the bridge, left the Punjabi and one coolie at the pinnacle rock. There didn't seem to be any way across that we knew of, but if the creatures in the cave were hostile, they might easily upset the bridge which had taken us so much trouble to make. But I didn't anticipate any active hostility from them. They were probably merely frightened at the unaccustomed sight of strangers, and any really primitive people might easily drop stones on the heads of newcomers. You have only to watch the face of the average Englishman in occupation of a railway carriage when you try to enter it to understand primitive man's dislike of intrusion on his privacy.

I got back to camp before dark, and it was a very

excited Frank and Valerie who clamoured for a dawn start when I had told my tale.

‘I’m not sure about you, old girl,’ remarked Frank, sucking at his pipe. ‘We don’t know what the people are like yet. If they’re nasty, you’re best out of the way.’

‘Wouldn’t it be better for me to come along, anyway, rather than be left here alone with the servants? If there’s no danger, there’s no reason why I shouldn’t come. And if there is, I’d rather not be left by myself in the middle of Baltistan. I should be safer with all of you.’

And as neither Frank nor I anticipated any danger in the real sense of the word, we made no further objections. At the worst, they might throw stones at us, and Valerie could always be kept a little way behind. But in all probability, once the weird people had had a look at us and realised that we intended no harm, they would, as Saunders phrased it, ‘feed out of our hands.’

But we decided that for the morrow we would only go out for the day just for a look. Then after a discussion with Saunders, who by then would probably know more about the place, we could decide on the advisability of shifting camp or not; and having settled that we went to bed, and for some reason or other I dreamt of that day at the Nishat Bagh and our journey back across the lake.

CHAPTER IX

SAUNDERS VANISHES

WE set out very early that morning, taking the tiffin basket with us, as well as some extra things for Saunders, in case he wanted to stop on by the valley. With us came Lal Singh, Rassula and Karima carrying our rifles, and we picked up Fateh Khan at the bridge. He had spent a peaceful night, and neither seen nor heard anything at all. Evidently the people of the caves were not in the habit of wandering much.

From the top of the ridge, when we had crossed the bridge, I tried to pick up Saunders's camp on the rise by the lake, but the distance was too great for us to see anything even with the glasses, though I thought I could make out the place where it ought to be.

'I wonder if he's found anything new yet,' said Valerie, as she gazed out over the plain through her lorgnettes, a slim little boyish figure in her brown tunic and knickers, the gay ribbon in her soft felt hat a pleasing relief to the rather monotonous khaki of the rest of us, though I always try to brighten the general colour scheme by cherry garters of Valerie's knitting, the cherry of my regiment's facings.

'Perhaps we shall find him holding a durbar of a lot of primitive cavemen. I should rather like to see that. The creature I saw yesterday was the nearest I've ever seen to the "missing link" that the evolutionists are always talking of, and the contrast between a dozen or so things like that and the immaculate Saunders would make a pleasing picture.'

'It'll be rather fun sending home photos of "missing links" to the illustrated papers, won't it?' said Frank, as we started down the slope.

'You'll have to write an article on them, Jim, in what the reviewers call your "vivid style,"' said Valerie, who always collects and frequently criticises vigorously any paragraphs in which the Press condescend to review my literary efforts.

'I will, if you unsplit all my infinitives for me, and put in the proper punctuation as usual.'

I have mentioned that Valerie is of a literary turn of mind, and I shouldn't like to have to pay her a shilling for every thousand words of mine that she has painstakingly edited and then typed for the delectation of the publishers. When Frank and I were once at a course of instruction together, Valerie earned us much unmerited kudos by her careful typing of our contributions to the knowledge of the art of war as interpreted by modern thought. After the manner of all schools, we brought out a magazine to be a souvenir of some very happy months, and Valerie has gone down to posterity in its pages in the fictitious dedication which our expert gunner contributed:

To
MY SISTER.

To whom are due such commas
and unsplit infinitives as adorn
this essay.

That remark about unsplit infinitives took us back to recollections of the cheerful days when we had become schoolboys again for a space, a pleasant change after the war, and we were well on our way to Saunders's camp before we came back to the subject

of the mysterious valley that lay ahead of the cliffs, under whose shadow we were now passing as we headed towards the lake.

‘The camp is just round the next corner,’ said I, as I helped Valerie over an extra big boulder. ‘I expect Saunders will be up the valley stalking the inhabitants, and the only person we’ll find will be Huddu the coolie.’

I was right in my surmise about Huddu being the only person we should find. He was the only one we found, but we didn’t find him round the next corner, for as we turned round it on a narrow ledge between the rush-fringed waters of the lake and the steep hillside, instead of the little bivouac tent, there lay in front of us a bare space with only the tumbled ashes of a cooking fire to mark the site where Saunders and I had camped two nights ago.

‘That’s funny,’ said I. ‘I wonder what made him shift his camp? And why the dickens hasn’t he left some one here to guide us. He knew we were coming to-day.’

And then, as we saw Lal Singh looking at the ground beyond the ashes and then up at the cliffs beyond, we realised suddenly the ghastly truth. There was no mistaking that ugly smear on the trodden earth, hardly dry even yet. And there were smaller patches of blood a little farther on, where the soft ground was all torn up as though there had been a struggle of sorts.

We looked around us, up at the silent hillsides above us, back across the placid waters of the lake where the duck floated peacefully, up the narrow ravine with its pleasant brawling stream and its shaded corners; and somehow, despite its utter dissimilarity, the view across the water brought back

my memories of the Dal Lake and of my dream of the night before, as we all realised simultaneously that this joyous venture of ours was turning into something that looked not unlike black tragedy.

'We've got to find them quick,' said Frank hoarsely, voicing all our thoughts. 'God knows what's happened. They must have rushed them in the night. That's the ravine, I take it?' He didn't say who 'they' were, but we all understood clearly enough that he meant the people who lived up in the cliffs.

'Yes, it's the only way in; and damned nasty, too, if they're waiting on top for us.'

I remembered the winding turns and the narrow corners, where a few men with stones on top could finish us off without our being able to strike a blow.

Frank was already charging the magazine of his rifle.

'Lal Singh had better take my express, and Fateh Khan and Rassula the shot-guns.' We had brought them with the idea of shooting some duck. 'The coolie will have to follow us; and you'll have to come too, Valerie, now you're here.' His tone clearly implied that he wished she hadn't been, and I mentally agreed with him.

But it was pretty clear that we couldn't leave her there or let her go back by herself, and she would be safer with us whatever happened, for after all we were on the lookout now, and we were well armed, while the probabilities were against the cave people having any serious kind of weapons.

'There's no other way up, I suppose,' said he, when we had distributed the guns and the ammunition.

'None that we could find yesterday. And there were no other tracks. I think we're as certain as one

can be in assuming that the way we found up to the caves is the only one there is.'

'There's nothing else we can do now except follow,' said Frank, doggedly determined.

I reflected. I have a great confidence in Frank, especially in a show of this sort; still I like to reflect over things, whoever I happen to be following. But clearly there was little else to be done. There was nothing to be gained by going back to camp and getting the two other men. Taj Muhammad is a worthy soul, but not a soldier. The cook, Ghulama, would be worse than useless. To get aid from the villages below would take days, and very likely no one would come, and if they did, they would probably bolt at the first sight of creatures such as I had seen yesterday.

'I could take Fateh Khan and reconnoitre a bit first, while the rest of you hang on here.'

'Yes, and get chawed up in detail the same as Saunders did,' said Frank. 'No good splitting up any more; we've got to keep together now.'

I could not but agree that his views were sound. We had lost Saunders and two of our best men already, thanks to having separated our forces, and it was no good risking that again. Better to hang together and make such show of force as we could.

'We must chance our arm going up, since there's no way round,' continued Frank. 'After all, they may not be looking for us. If they generally keep to the valley there's nothing to tell them that there are any more of us. They may think they've got the lot. With luck we might come on them unexpected and be able to rush them. Wish we knew how many there were.'

'Do you think they've killed them?' said Valerie

to me in a low voice, as Frank was giving directions to Lal Singh. Her face was rather pale, but she was quiet and self-possessed enough.

‘No,’ said I, pretending an assurance I didn’t feel. ‘Probably they wanted loot. You see they’ve not left a stitch of the camp kit. We shall probably find Saunders hale and hearty, disputing the possession of his silk shirt with one of the missing links.’

But although I tried to put a cheerful face on things, I could not forget that figure behind the ice with the spike and the charred limbs; and I wished to heavens that Valerie had never come to Baltistan.

‘You and Fateh Khan had better lead,’ said Frank. I could see he grudged the front place to me — he’s the kind of person who grudges the front seat to any one when things look ‘sticky,’ but it was clearly the only thing to do since I knew the way. ‘Rassula, Karima, and I come next, and Valerie just behind us, with Lal Singh to look after her.’

‘Right-o. Keep a little way behind us, but always in sight,’ said I, as I slipped my safety-catch forward and started up the ravine with Fateh Khan just behind me, my shot-gun loaded with lethal bullets in his capable hands.

The gorge seemed very gloomy to-day, although the sky was cloudless. I am rather cursed with an imagination, and on these trench crawl kind of stunts always expect that the other fellow will get in first shot. Not that I really expected any shots at all — boulders on one’s head were more likely; but it was a nasty place if they expected us, and there was Valerie just behind.

It seemed ages before the ravine opened in front of us on to the fields, and craning cautiously round the corner of a rock, I peered forward. Just as on the

two previous days, there was not a sign of life. The fields lay deserted, and the little water channels rippled away merrily — only to-day their note sounded mocking. I pulled out my glasses, and studied the ground in front and the surrounding hills and the gap where the track led up again on the farther side of the amphitheatre. I spent ten minutes over it, but there was never a sign of life to be seen. I began to hope then that Frank's idea that they did not know there were any more of us might be the right one.

I called up the others and showed them the fields and the path beyond. Barring the coolie, who was gibbering with fright, they were all pretty cool. Lal Singh, of course, was imperturbable as ever, while Frank had just that slight tension in his face that means he intends to go through with something. Valerie was as quiet as you please, looking through her little silver lorgnettes across the fields, and the familiar gesture evoked all sorts of scenes out of the past — hotels and ballrooms and pleasant things millions of miles away from this ghastly impasse we had suddenly stumbled into. For ghastly it undoubtedly was. Saunders and his three men had most clearly been carried off after some kind of a fight by what appeared to be, judging by the man in the ice, a particularly barbarous collection of savages.

'Fateh Khan and I will skirt round the fields now, and you can cover us,' said I. 'When we're safely over, the rest of you come along.'

Frank nodded, and the Punjabi and I went on. We saw nothing at all until we came out on the far side to the place where we had noticed the tracks the day before. There was a confused mass of tracks now, barefoot all, and here and there a splash of blood. Evidently one or more of the party had been

wounded, and I hoped sincerely that it was the raiders.

I waved the others on once more, and when they got close to us pushed forward again up the narrow entrance, until I got close to the corner where the ice, with its sinister figure, was hidden. The party had evidently halted there too, for the snow was much trampled and bloodstained. Frank, seeing me check, stopped too, but I called him up quietly, and showed him the snow and the crevice.

'That's where the thing we saw yesterday is,' I explained. 'Don't let Valerie go in just now; he's not pretty. I believe you're right. We may have the luck to come on them in that open space at the end of this when we've rounded the cliff. Keep a bit farther behind, and when I hold my hand up, stop altogether, and keep down while I go on and reconnoitre. If I get round the corner I'll drop Fateh Khan to keep touch. If you hear me shoot, come in quick.'

It was a weird scene in that narrow gorge as we stood there while the others came up and joined us. Even at midday there was no sun there, and it was bitterly cold as well as gloomy in the narrow slit between the menacing black rock walls. To our left was the rock-bound crevice, where stood the shapeless figure of a man who had stood there — perhaps to warn us — for we knew not how many years. In front and about us the tumbled, blood-stained snow almost as I had seen it in my dream. Lal Singh, a sturdy, bearded figure leaning on his rifle, with Karima and the tiffin coolie beside him, Fateh Khan and Rassula talking in low voices as they looked out ahead, Frank and Valerie looking about them. Just a typical shooting party suddenly launched into what looked like a border raid.

Then we set out again, and always at the back of my mind was the cold fear that it might all be a trap, that suddenly we should find our way barred behind us. But with our small numbers we could afford to leave no one behind, as we would have liked to do had we been a stronger party. With half a dozen more trustworthy men like Lal Singh or Fateh Khan, we could have piqueted the ends of the ravine and of this gorge, and so ensured safe retreat. However, it was no good thinking about the impossible. We had to make the best shift we could with what we had actually got.

As I pushed on I wondered what sight would greet me when I rounded the corner where Saunders and I had lain watching the caves only the morning before. My great hope was that we should find the whole of the strange people out in the open dividing the spoil, and generally holding some kind of savage rejoicing over their captives. Knowing something of primitive peoples, I did not expect that they would have killed any of the party yet, unless any of them had got killed in the actual rushing of the camp. If they were going to do anything in that line, they would wait a bit and get all the amusement possible out of it first. Perhaps wait two or three days. Even torture — which loomed as a horrid possibility — would hardly be resorted to at once.

And if we found them in the open, a good burst of fire into a crowd of savages unprovided with, and probably unaccustomed to, firearms would throw them into sufficient confusion to enable us to rescue the captives and bolt back into the ravine, where they would be unable to follow us. Two rifles at the most could hold that path for hours. I only hoped that none of Saunders's party would require carrying,

which would delay us. Then once back in the open, we could cover our way to the bridge, and once across that we were complete masters of the situation.

I dropped Fateh Khan at the corner where we had made the men wait the day before, and yard by yard I worked my cautious way up to the pile of rocks whence I could scan the cave's mouth without being seen. But to my intense disappointment the little plateau was empty, or almost empty, for in one corner was a flapping, jostling collection of birds that fought about something which I presently recognised as the naked body of poor Huddu the coolie.

The caves above were black and lifeless, and although I watched for some time, no trace of movement rewarded me.

I signalled back to Fateh Khan to come up, and when he did, sent him back for Frank, who presently came cautiously worming his way along in the shadow of the rocks. Making him keep well under cover, I pointed out the caves.

'They've taken them up there all right for a cert. Probably the whole lot are inside now, but the d——d swine have done in poor Huddu. I think you're right. They don't think there are any more of us left. But what we're going to do now, the Lord only knows. There's no earthly way of getting up there without assistance from above.'

'No; but they can't come out either without our seeing them,' said Frank. 'Would it do any good to stop here until something happens?'

'We could do that certainly, and then we might let some of them come out and round them up. After that we should at least know something, and we could do a swop of prisoners perhaps. I wonder what they're all doing inside now?'

'Jabbering over the show, probably. Pawing Saunders to see what he's made of. Ugh!' Frank made a grimace of disgust.

But I thought he was probably right. It's just the sort of thing a lot of savages would be doing. But the longer that amused them, the more time we'd have to work in.

'They probably come out at night mostly,' went on Frank. 'If you lived half the year in a dark hole like they must, you wouldn't care overmuch for this kind of glare. Early morning and evening are probably their times. I must say, now we've got to the head of this valley, I'd like awfully to keep it. If we don't hold it, and they come out, we might not be able to force our way up again. Two men here, or even one, could hold this place till all's blue, provided we're sure there's no other way out except those cave mouths. It's getting on for full moon, and for the next four nights anyway there'll be practically no darkness at all, provided the weather holds.'

'We'll have to get camp up here somehow or other then, and how are we going to do that?'

'We could do it in a couple of shifts, I think, if we all carry loads. Get up enough, anyway. But I don't think it's a good scheme getting it right up here. Our best plan would be to get our stuff up to the fort rock. That's safe as houses. No one can cross the ravine except by the bridge, and one man can hold that. It's on the right side of the ditch, and we can put Valerie on top, with Lal Singh on the stairs, if necessary. Now that we know the best way, it's only about an hour and a half to get here from the bridge, going quickly.'

'True. Well, I suggest that you go back now with

the whole party, leaving me and Fateh Khan here. If any of the cave people show, we'll let them come down, and then round them up. I think that's better than shooting offhand. We want to find out what's going on inside before we do anything.'

'I suppose there is no other way out,' said Frank meditatively. 'If there is, then you and Fateh Khan will either get done in or join the crowd inside.'

'We've simply got to chance something, Frank. But I don't believe there is any other way. This is absolutely the only path up from the fields to this lot of caves, and if there were other caves, there would have been tracks leading off elsewhere, and there weren't; I'm positive of that. And anyhow, they won't catch me and Fateh Khan. What I'm more afraid of is that if we're forced into shooting, the blokes inside will proceed to finish off Saunders and the others. That's why I'm in favour of letting some of them come down if they show any signs of doing so, and then tying them up.'

'I suppose it's all we can do. Well, if you take first shift here, I'll rush the whole lot back as quick as I can, and get up enough kit for the night. We can do it if we're quick.'

'Yes. It's only elevenish now. If you leg it hard you could get one lot of loads up to the fort before dark easily. I should keep the coolies with you all the time, though.'

'I shall, and Mr. Ghulama likewise. As a matter of fact, it would be perfectly safe to leave the rest of our things in the present camp. No one ever comes into this plain. Rassula made that perfectly clear from his last visit to the lower villages.'

'Still, they might risk it now that we're here. Well, you'd better scuttle if you want to get back

before dark. As you go back give Fateh Khan some grub for me and a water-bottle. If you're back in time to-night, get us up a couple of blankets or something. It's going to be most perishing cold here.'

'Right-o; I'll do that. But I'll be along to take over from you probably before dusk.'

'No point in that. You'll be much more tired than I shall. Come along first thing in the morning and relieve me. One of us will always have to be here. We can't trust this job to the men. They'll start an unnecessary fight or something in that line, and upset the whole show.'

Frank slid away, and a little later noises behind me caused me to look round, to find Fateh Khan crawling up with most of the contents of the tiffin basket and a water-bottle. Valerie was evidently determined that I shouldn't starve. They had already started back, the Punjabi said, as he cleared away some of the smaller rocks to make a comfortable place for whichever of us was not on watch to lie down in.

It was a dull job, for nothing showed all day. I had thoughts of pulling Huddu in — it annoyed me to see the birds pecking at him. But reflecting that for the present concealment was vital, I gave up the idea. We took it turn and turn about, and later on the one who was not on watch used to creep back down the path round the corner to do what the army calls 'physical jerks' to restore our circulation, and I was amazingly glad when just at sundown Rassula appeared carrying a couple of blankets, my poshtin, and Fateh Khan's thick coat, together with the thermos-flask and some more food. He said that he had come on ahead of the rest, who were just climbing the fort when he lost sight of them. They had

enough kit for the night, in fact more than enough, since Frank had had the happy idea of using the six sheep we had in true Central Asian style as pack animals, roping light loads on to them.

I wondered if this was a memory of Monocloid's proposal of the 'sheep sandwich,' which that genius had advanced at the course of instruction I mentioned before. He electrified our teachers by enunciating the doctrine that motor transport, far from improving an army's mobility, hindered it, and that what we wanted was the 'sheep sandwich.' I could hear Monocloid saying it as I enveloped myself in my poshtin — it was piercingly cold now that the sun had gone down, and despite the extremely unpleasant predicament we were in, could not help a feeble smile at the pictures it evoked.

'One sheep is a meat ration for forty men, isn't it? Then put fifty or sixty pounds of flour on the thing's back, and there you are. One day's bread and meat ration — all complete. It's its own transport — no waste of petrol, no transport personnel, no empty convoys choking roads the wrong way. That's the sort of thing that enabled Attila to move across Asia, boys. Simply no comparison with three-ton lorries.'

And with the thought of Monocloid came the wish for that versatile genius to help us out of our present hole. It was just the sort of job which he would really have relished.

Then as Rassula departed again into the shadows of the gorge behind us, I relieved Fateh Khan, for whom the shikari had brought a bundle of chupattis tied up in a cloth, and continued my watch over the silent cliff face in front.

CHAPTER X

THE MESSAGE

ALL night we lay there watching for any sign of movement in the caves. As daylight died away, the radiance of the moon, now nearing its full, grew stronger, throwing its silver sheen on the snows that towered high above us into the blue vault of the sky, where the seven stars of the Bear, the *Haft aurung*, or seven thrones, of the old Central Asian poet, swung faintly in the blue. There was a comfort about them, as there always is about the stars in strange places. They were a link with other surroundings so far away, and I like sometimes to think that they carry messages for one in their wheeling path night by night.

The little plateau was forbidding in the moonlight, with its wall of black rock, its ill-smelling mounds of half-seen rubbish, and that ominous pallid heap among the surrounding shadows, which represented what had been only a few hours before a willing and cheerful if rather mutton-headed follower of our party.

And high above him loomed blackly the entrance to the caves or mines, or whatever it was that lay in the heart of the mountain, somewhere within which were imprisoned the other three members of our expedition, surrounded by Heaven alone knew what foul beings. I could only hope that so far they were still unhurt, and that somehow or other we would be able to find our way in and rescue them, though at the moment the chances looked anything but favourable.

Once I thought I caught a glimpse of light in one of the entrances, but perhaps it was only imagination, since it did not reappear. Or it may have been some slight reflection of the moonbeams.

Dawn came at last, the first rays of the sun flinging red gleams on the snow pinnacles above the black shadows wherein I lay, with Fateh Khan curled up in his coat and blanket asleep just behind me. Personally I had got but little sleep myself in the spells when he had been on watch, since the cold was too great and a slight wind had risen, which seemed to find its way through every chink in one's wrappings.

The light crept slowly down towards us as the sun, still unseen from our valley, swung higher and higher. At last the growing clearness reached the rock wall pierced by the cave entrances, and nook and cranny showed sharp in the dawn light. And then I became aware that a figure was framed in the entrance of the largest cave, and slowly and carefully, so as not to give any sign of my presence, I slid up my glasses, expecting to see the same ape-like creature as on the first day.

But when I had the glasses focussed I saw that this was a different type of being. It was an unmistakable woman, and a youngish one at that, who stood there looking down the ravine. Far from bad-looking, too, except for her pallor, with her straight features of rather Kashmiri type, and thick black hair sweeping down on to her shoulders. For clothing she wore a sort of short kilt-like skirt of some coarse material, brownish in colour, picked out with a crude pattern; and round her neck, hanging in several rows down over her bosom, were strings of red stones — red stones that sparkled as the first rays of the sun swept down over the mountains.

Compared to the thing I had seen before she was beautiful, and even on the river in Kashmir I think one would have remarked on her, and many of the Kashmir women have strong claims to good looks.

She stood there a space looking straight out before her, and then it seemed to me that she turned her attention to the rock where Fateh Khan and I were hidden. Then she looked behind her for an instant ere once more she turned her gaze in our direction, and with an unmistakable gesture, as though to attract attention, held up her hand, in which fluttered something whitish.

The gesture puzzled me; it was so clearly an invitation. Was it a trap to see if there were more of us? Then she repeated it twice. I hesitated an instant, dallying with the idea of hailing her, then thought better of it. What we wanted was some of them to come down from the caves so that we could capture them.

She stood as though puzzled, and it seemed to me that there was disappointment in her face, as if she had been sure some one would answer. But an instant later she had leant forward, dropped the thing she held in her hand, which fell swiftly downwards in a white streak, and straightened up again, looking once more towards us, made a gesture with one hand towards what she had dropped, turned, and vanished into the darkness behind her.

I cautiously stuck my foot into Fateh Khan's face behind me, and heard him roll over and then creep up beside me, his gun barrels preceding him.

'Mark the caves,' said I. 'I'm going across the open to get something. If anything moves above, call out, but don't shoot unless I'm in danger.'

Then with a good look to see that the caves were

still empty, I ran across the plateau to where the white cloth, as it seemed to be, showed on top of a mound of débris. I gathered it up —unmistakably Saunders's silk handkerchief knotted round some small object—and fled back to cover.

I had half expected to be greeted by a shower of stones or worse missiles from above. The thing seemed so palpably a trap. But Fateh Khan reported that nothing had moved above, and the caves were clearly empty as I looked up again.

Then I undid the knots in the handkerchief, and found Saunders's cigarette-case, a gold and gun-metal one of the type affected by people who do not like bulges in their dress waistcoats. Inside, scrawled in what looked like soot on a piece of crumpled paper, were the words:

‘Come quick, only two days.—SAU—’

The last word was unfinished, and from the dirty smear of black following it, it looked as if the writer had been interrupted.

This was clearly no trap. The writing, crude as it was, was unmistakably that of Saunders; there was no getting away from the peculiar S at the beginning of the unfinished signature.

The message conveyed a sense of impending peril, just that and nothing more. No indication of their position, or of how to reach him. I began to wish most frantically that I had hailed the woman who had dropped the thing. Perhaps she would reappear shortly; and with that hope I lay there for another hour, until, turning round at the sound of a falling stone, I saw Frank, followed by Rassula, making his way up towards us.

I slid down from my perch, leaving Fateh Khan to look out, and showed Frank the message.

'What do you make of it?' I asked after I'd told him how I'd got it.

'Nothing, except that we've got to hurry. Have you seen anything more of the woman?'

I told him that she had not appeared again, and suggested that perhaps she would come back presently with another message.

'Well, if she doesn't, and we don't catch any of the beasts, we'll have to try and rush the place somehow. I'll stop here and watch all day, while you two get back and make up some ladders. I've sent off Lal Singh, Karima, and the two coolies to get saplings from the small patch of birch about a mile from the fort. They'll be back by the time you get there. Valerie and Taj Muhammad and the cook are on top. Be careful how you go up, because you'll find Valerie sitting on the steps with my shot-gun. She knows just enough to pull the trigger.'

I looked at the rocks ahead. The lowest cave was close on thirty feet above us, and the face of smooth rock presented no crevice that offered chance of climbing. A thirty-foot ladder seemed out of the question, and I said so.

'I know that. But I've explained to Lal Singh what I want. We must make up two of the lightest possible kind about thirteen feet long each. We can carry them up. Then we'll slide one up with two fellows to steady it below, and lash the other to the top of it. From the top of the second ladder one ought to be able to get one's hands on to the floor and pull up, and after that, with a rope, the rest will be easy enough. Covered by rifles from here we ought to get in, and that's all we can count on. Once inside we shall have to trust to a fairly straight passage with no side entrances.'

'And when are we going to try?' The idea seemed hopeless from the outset, but I could suggest nothing better, and clearly something had to be done, and done quickly.

'To-morrow morning, if nothing happens before that. Perhaps some of them will show up between now and then, and with a few hostages we'd be in a stronger position. Come up here this evening when you've got things ready, and we'll make the final arrangements for the show.'

There was nothing further to discuss then, so I left them, and with Fateh Khan made my way back to the Fort Rock across the narrow bridge. I saw Taj Muhammad standing on top of the tower base as I came down from the ridge, for which I was glad, as I trusted he would pass the word to Valerie. I was not anxious to round the corner on her unexpectedly.

I found her on the stairway with Dog Bill at her feet, Frank's twelve-bore in her hands, looking for Valerie — generally tireless — rather worn out, and unfeignedly glad to see me back again, as she led the way up to where Ghulama had breakfast waiting, a meal for which I was very ready. While I ate I had to tell her of the little I had seen, and together we puzzled over the woman with what were apparently ruby necklaces. But rubies interested us no more. All we wanted was to get Saunders and his two men back alive and unhurt.

'It seems pretty clear that unless it's a trap, Saunders has got hold of some one who seems friendly to him, and perhaps we shall hear from Frank presently that she's appeared again with a rope to lend us a hand up,' I concluded, as I lit a cigarette after breakfast was over. 'Anyway, person, I'm

afraid we're in a hole, good and proper, and there's no getting away from that. Saunders wouldn't write a message of that sort unless he really meant it.'

And Valerie agreed, adding with her determined little air that if we went to the caves next day she was coming too.

'If anything's going to happen, Jim, it's got to happen to all of us. I'm not going to be left behind if you and Frank get . . . hurt.' She obviously meant 'killed,' though she had checked over the word in time.

'Yes, person, perhaps you're right. It would be better to go together, though it may be a long road.'

'Whatever the road is, I'm going with you, Jim,' said she simply, this time forgetting to include Frank; and I think she was referring to a road very much farther than the cliffs, the long road that ends in the shadows before you come out into the light on the far side of the gorge — the gorge that no one ever comes back from. But when I go down that road, I'd like a friend with me, and I can't think of any better companion than Valerie.

'I got your pistols out last night, Jim. I thought you'd want them. We had to leave a lot of the kit, of course.'

'Thoughtful person. Yes; I want them badly. Where are they?'

She produced them from the little servants' tent, which was all they had been able to bring along, and which Frank had pitched for her, and I spent the next twenty minutes in showing her the mechanism of the .32 Browning, which is my second-string handgun. She mastered it sufficiently for it not to be too great a danger to herself or us; but as I belted the thing on her I thought it wise to tell her that she was

not to attempt to use it till the last resource, and then not over a yard range.

Then we climbed on to the wall to see if there was any sign of Lal Singh and his men. We were rewarded by the sight of his party nearing the rock, carrying two long birch saplings, and half an hour later saw us ripping them up and trimming them. It was fortunate that we had Lal Singh and some tools with us. It was laborious work on the green timber, but by the time Karima, Fateh Khan, and the two coolies returned from a second journey with two more similar trees which Lal Singh had selected, we were well through with the first one.

By four o'clock that evening we had two strong if crude ladders ready — one well over thirteen feet, and the other just over twelve. They were light enough to be carried by two men each, and strong enough for two men at a time on the rungs, and, testing them against the side of the rock, we found that lashed together they stood fairly steady. I then set Lal Singh and Karima to make up a rope-ladder, which could be dropped from the cave entrance as a second line, and went off with Fateh Khan to visit Frank in the gorge, hoping to find that the woman had appeared with a further message from Saunders. But he reported that she had not shown up again.

We discussed the programme for the attack, and decided to make it the following morning at dawn. We had no indication as to the habits of the men in the caves, but we hoped that they would probably be asleep then, which would give us a chance of getting in unobserved. The woman with the message had chosen that moment to drop it out, and her non-appearance since rather pointed to the fact that the rest of the inhabitants were awake, and that she was

unable to get to the cave mouths again. It was the sketchiest of theories, but we had absolutely nothing else to go on. We had discarded the idea of trying to effect an entrance in the night, because we wanted daylight to get away in, when we could get the best use out of our rifles.

‘We may have a mix-up in the dark inside, but we’d best have the daylight to come back to,’ said Frank. ‘Living in there always, they will probably be far more dangerous in the half light than in the sun.’

We fixed up the details for the attack. I was to bring up every one by half past four in the morning. The fact that we should require all hands, including the coolies, for getting the ladders in position precluded any question of leaving Valerie behind with no one except Ghulama, who would be worse than useless if anything happened to us.

‘If we’re scuppered, they’ll then go and find her. I’d rather she was with us,’ remarked Frank quietly, only the shadows in his hazel eyes showing the tension behind, and I agreed. The proper use of the last cartridge is a nice hair-splitting point for moralists in armchairs, and one that personally I refrain from arguing out even with myself, preferring to wait until the occasion arises, and I hope and pray it never will. But if it does, I shall be very grateful that at the other end of the road that Valerie had mentioned that morning will be waiting the moralist’s Maker, and not the moralist.

It was practically dark when Fateh Khan and I got back to camp — we had taken up food for Frank and Rassula with us — and I was glad to find Lal Singh on the stairs rather than Valerie, for the burly Sikh has eyes like a cat in the dark, whereas Valerie

is humble about her eyesight even in broad daylight, and Frank's twelve-bore has a light pull.

They had got everything laid out ready for the next day — the two scaling-ladders, if one could call them such; the rope-ladder; and a couple more ropes neatly coiled beside it; our two crowbars and the jumping-bar; and some wood pickets, which Lal Singh had made to help us fasten the ladder in place once we had got it up.

It was late before Valerie and I sat down to our very gloomy dinner in the old ruined buildings that crowned the rock. We did our mutual best to cheer each other up by talking of the nice things of the past — there didn't seem any very nice prospects at present to discuss — but they were rather feeble efforts at best, I fancy.

We sat up in the moonlight afterwards, feeling no particular inclination to go to bed, though both of us were pretty tired after the last thirty-six hours. It somehow wasn't quite the same thing as a night before a 'push' in the old days, since Valerie was there, and one hadn't shaken down in the way that one always shook down in war time after the first few days of each new spell after leave, for instance.

But all the same I would sooner have had it so, and though we didn't talk very much, it was a comfort beyond price to feel each other there, and to know that whatever the morrow might bring, we should in all human probability share it; and that after all is the great thing, since the chief fear of death lies in its loneliness. One can understand the primitive idea of human sacrifices at funerals, the desire that the dead man should not have to make the journey alone; for loneliness is the thing every human being fears the most, and whatever religious views one may hold, one is, after all, only human.

Finally, Valerie sent me to bed, and watching her lace the flies of her tiny tent, where even she could not stand upright, I felt rather sick at the thought of what to-morrow might bring as I lay on my valise under the stars. I was glad when, turning over to try to sleep, my fingers touched the comfortable, roughened grip of my big Smith and Wesson, a very treasured possession that was a gift — strictly against regulations, of course — from my British company, when in common with most officers of the Indian Army I was recalled to India in 1916. It's a gem to shoot with, and the .450 bullet is the best man-killing thing yet made; and just then I was beginning to feel a distinct craving to hear those bullets go home in the men — whoever they were — who lived in the caves up yonder.

I had barely got to sleep — it wasn't more than half an hour — when I woke with a start, hearing voices calling. I am a heavy sleeper as a rule, but I woke straight off and sat with my revolver in my hand. Next instant, in response to Fateh Khan's hail from the stairway, I was on my feet, and saw Valerie's shadow on the wall of her tent. She had evidently been reading one of the little books that always lie on the table beside her bed, and pack into the pocket of her valise when on trek.

I slipped down the stairs to find Fateh Khan peering into the shadows below, whence a voice was hailing us.

'It's Gulab Khan's voice,' said he. 'I'm sure it is. Shall I call to him to come?'

'Yes; tell him to come up. Not more than one man at a time can come, and I'll put the light on in a minute.'

'Ā-jāo! Ā-jāo bhai!' he shouted twice, and then

presently round the corner of the rock, here in deep shadow, the moon being on the other side, we saw a man's figure — a man who presently came out into the white circle of the electric-torch and stopped, blinking.

It was Gulab Khan all right, clothed only in a rough rag round his loins, with blood and dirt caked about him, limping somewhat, but otherwise to all seeming unharmed.

'Where is the sahib?' I asked, the first thing that came into my mind.

He pointed wearily toward the hills.

'In the caves with the devil people. They took us all unprepared, though the sahib fought like a *pahlwan*. I was asleep, and knew naught till I woke suddenly with many men holding me.'

I saw that the first thing to do was to get the man up on top and wrap him up — he was shivering with cold, and apparently pretty done in. So leaving Fateh Khan on guard, I took him up the stairway, where I found Lal Singh and the others clustering round the entrance, and Valerie, wrapped in her big brown coat, her feet encased in Gilgit boots, holding a lantern.

'Get some clothes for him — his own if we've got any here — any one else's if we haven't,' said I to Lal Singh, as I pulled off the blanket in which Karima had wrapped himself, and gave it to Gulab. 'And get some hot tea and some food, quick.'

Luckily the cook had kept the fire going, probably for comfort against the devils of the place, and by the time that the men had fitted out Gulab with some clothes, Taj Muhammad arrived with a steaming bowl of tea, into which, on the pretext of its being medicine, I poured a very stiff dose of whisky. I

knew that was the only way I would be able to get the Punjabi to touch alcohol.

He choked at the unwonted fire of the tea, but lapped it down like a man who is clearly famished, and after he had bolted some of the stale chupattis which were produced for him, I judged him in a fit condition to be questioned further.

Clearly he had not come from Frank's direction, or he would have said so. But if he hadn't, where the devil had he come from? He had come back to our side of the ravine without crossing the bridge, for Fateh Khan was posted on the edge of the gap in the stairs just above it, and would have seen him cross, whereas he had come up the stairway to us from the lower side. If he could reach us, then others could do the same. And in that case, what guarantee was there now that we might not find ourselves cut off from Frank and Rassula, and also cut off from any possible road home? Though I was extraordinarily glad to see the Punjabi back — it was one more fighting man, a big access of strength to our small party — I was extremely perturbed at the vista of possibilities opened up by the manner of his return, and very thankful that we had occupied the rock.

Then sending the remainder of the men away, I bade Gulab sit down by the cook's fire, and told him to tell us what had happened to Saunders's party, and how he himself had managed to escape.

It was naturally a disconnected account, and when it got to the part inside the caves, for obvious reasons he was not too coherent. But when he had finished I had a great deal more hope of rescuing the others than I had had for the last day and a half, and it was with considerable relief that I sent off Lal Singh and Karima — I didn't like to send a single

man — to Frank with an account of Gulab's story, bidding him come back with Karima as quick as he could. In the face of what the Punjabi told us, it was clear that the scheme of forcing an entrance into the caves from the gorge was out of the question, and that we stood a very much better chance by another route.

Despite Gulab's lack of skill in picturing his adventures, the story as he told it to us was pretty graphic, and I have only to shut my eyes now to call up the scene again: the big Punjabi still with the blanket wrapped over his borrowed clothes, the fire-light glinting on his gaunt, wolfish features and flickering on the steel bracelet of Lal Singh, half seen in the shadows beside us, his long hair done up in a knot on top of his head, bearded chin propped on his palm; Valerie in the Rurki chair beside me — our only furniture in the fort — bending forward to listen, and over us the moonlit sky; while far below the sound of the stream made an accompaniment to the Punjabi's words as he told us of the mystery and terror hidden in those faintly seen mountains below, whose shadows Frank and the shikari lay watching in the moonlight.

CHAPTER XI

GULAB'S ADVENTURES

‘AFTER you went back to the camp that day, sahib,’ said Gulab, ‘I went up with Saunders sahib again to the open place under the rocks. Gobind Singh and the Kashmiri we left at the camp. We saw nothing until it was getting dark, and then we came back to the tent.

‘Just before Saunders sahib went to bed — he was in the small tent — he called to the Sikh and me and asked if we had seen anything on the hills above. The sahib said that he thought he had seen a light once as though some one had lighted a small fire; but although we looked much — and the sahib had his glasses — there was nothing more seen.

‘We two sepoy's slept by the fire, for the night was cold there, and there was a wind blowing down from the hills. The coolie also was sleeping near us.

‘In the middle of the night the Sikh woke me, and said that he thought there were people moving about near us, so for a while we listened; but although there was now no more wind and all was quiet, there were no noises, and I said that he must have been mistaken and there was no need to tell the sahib. So after some talk we went to sleep again.

‘After that I know not what happened, since I woke suddenly in the moonlight feeling men about me, and as I sat up several of them fell upon me and held me down, and then as I struggled I heard noises from the sahib's tent, where I saw other men moving. And the Sikh and the coolie also had been seized even as I.’

At this point I interrupted his narrative to ask him what the men were like.

‘Sahib, they were very wild men, almost, it seemed to me, as beasts, half naked and evil smelling, even more evil smelling than some of the Baltis among whom I have been. Small men with long hair, but loose, not tied up like a Sikh’s, and their eyes were like jackals’ eyes in the dark.

‘And others of them had fallen upon Saunders sahib as he came out of the tent, and I saw him in the moonlight struggling with them. And one of them he slew with his hands, smashing his head against a rock, so that for a breath the others fell back. Then I think the sahib turned to get his gun, which was in the tent, and they fell upon him again, and after that I saw no more, for the men who had seized me bound me and laid me upon my face.

‘Then later we were dragged away up the path to the hills, until we reached the caves, where there were other men, and also women, waiting with ropes, and by these we were dragged up into the darkness. But the devil people seemed not to mind the darkness, since, although I could see nought, they trod quickly and surely like animals.

‘They took us through many and long passages in the mountain, like the tunnels that the sappers made in the war, until at last we came into a very big cave, where there were still more men and women — all dirty and with few clothes — sitting by a fire. But it was warm in there, and there was also a little light, both from the fire and from a strange place in the rock, where burnt a great flame, though of what I could not see nor understand.

‘I saw the sahib again then standing in front, his hands bound like mine, and with a rope round his

throat, held by two of the devil men, lest even then with bound hands he might do some of them harm. His face was covered with blood, but his eyes were cool. And near him was Gobind Singh, but Huddu I saw not. But later the woman told me that he was dead.

‘And then among all these people I saw a face I knew, and although my arms were bound I tried to leap forward from the men who held me.

‘For standing speaking to the sahib, and with the sahib’s gun in his hand, was that fiend from hell, my cousin, Baz Khan. And he smiled evilly at the sahib as he spoke, though what enmity he should have for him I know not.

‘But the men about me flung me to the ground again, and then Baz Khan came up, and when he saw me spat in my face. He made no motion to harm me, which was strange, but later I understood. Only he said to me very quietly, and with a laugh —

“‘Oh, son of my father’s brother, glad I am that they did not fling thee down like the Kashmiri from the caves. Else I had missed a pleasing day. But now this will be far better than merely seeing thee hanged in Landi Kotal. The sahibs have foolish quick ways of killing, whereas we have better ones.”

‘I tried again then to get free, or even to stand up to speak what I had in my mind to say. But the men put a rope about my throat, and tightened it so that I could hardly breathe. And Baz Khan, seeing me struggling, laughed again, and left us to go back to the sahib.

‘Then they stripped us and piled all our clothes along with the things which they had brought from our camp, and though I could not follow their speech, it seemed to me that they were dividing them.

‘And then it was that the woman came.’

‘What woman, Gulab?’ I asked. It was the second time he had mentioned her. We imagined it was the woman who had dropped the message for us, although we wondered if he knew that.

‘It was a woman who was different from the others, sahib, one who seemed a woman and not half a devil. I think she holds some power over the others, for when she came forward they fell aside like sweepers fall aside if a Brahman come down a street. She wore red stones around her neck, though she also had but few clothes.

‘Me she spoke to in Balti slowly, like one who knows not a language well, asking me who we were and whence we came, and signing to the men to loosen the rope about my neck. But just then Baz Khan came up, and it seemed to me that there was enmity between the two, for their glances were fierce, although I could not understand all their speech, in which were many strange words.

‘Once Baz Khan lifted his hand as if to strike her, but she stood still and held out her hand, saying something, and he stayed as one afraid, while the devil people about us hushed from their chattering. But after that she signed to the men to bind me again, so that I could not speak. Then she spoke to the sahib, but since he knows not Balti, got no answer. And in the same way with Gobind Singh.

‘After that they talked a lot among themselves — talk that I could not altogether understand, but it was about us, and it seemed that they quarrelled among themselves in the matter. Then Baz Khan spoke, and they all seemed pleased with his words, and laughed and chattered like monkeys, while some of them came and felt our arms and legs, as though we had been sheep at a market.

'The woman, however, spoke also, after which they quarrelled again, shrieking in loud voices, and some seemed to hold with her, but most with Baz Khan.

'And at the end we were all led away, but to different places, since I saw not the sahib or Gobind Singh again, for I was taken by those few who were with the woman. And at this Baz Khan was angry, but he seemed afraid to lay hands on us. I was led through more dark passages, until in the end they brought me to a small cave, but cleaner than the others, where there was another flame burning in a hole in the wall, and there the woman made them loosen the rope round my throat, but they bound my feet and one arm. Then she gave me some food.

'Later the others went away, leaving me alone with the woman, and when they were gone she questioned me, but this time she spoke as a friend, asking why we had come to this place, and whether we were alone and other questions. She also said that I was to have no fear, since she wished to help us, but that most of the people desired greatly to kill us.

'Her speech was full of strange words, and she spoke after a strange fashion, making pretence of not knowing things such as every child in my village knows. For instance, when I said that if they killed the sahib, the Sirkar would send troops and hang them all, she asked, what was the Sirkar?

'But seeing that she was friendly, or seemingly so, and that she was different from the others, I asked who she was. She told me that she had not always been there, but a long time ago she could remember being in the open hills with people who lived in tents with animals — Gujars, I think she meant. One day she had gone into the woods in the evening a little

way from the camp, and was seized by three of the devil people. She thinks after that they tried to seize another child, but the people from the tents came out, and those who had taken her fled, bearing her away.

‘It seems that when she was brought to the caves at first they had wanted to kill her, but an old woman took her and kept her, and when the old woman had died she had taken her place. I think they are heathen, worshipping *Bhuts*, and that the woman serves the *Bhuts* like the women in some of the Lamaseries in Ladakh, and that that is why they fear her.

‘I asked her of Baz Khan, and when she understood of whom I was talking — she did not know his name — she told me that he and another man had come there three years before, and at first were prisoners. But later Baz Khan had killed the chief, and, after the fashion of the devil people, had become chief himself, since it seems that if any man fights the chief and kills him, he becomes chief in his place.

‘But the man who had come with Baz Khan desired to escape, and found a way over the snow. But Baz Khan, not desiring that he should go away, followed him with others and killed him, though how she did not say; and since then Baz Khan had got more power than the old chief had, and desired to take her also, which she did not wish. And it seems that it is against their customs for any man to take the woman who guards the *Bhuts*, and so even yet Baz Khan is unable to take her. But she fears he will soon. And I, knowing Baz Khan, think so too, for the other women there are ill-looking, and this one is well-favoured.

‘So seeing that she was clearly an enemy of my

enemy, I told her more. At first I had feared a trap, and that they sought also to catch you and Weston sahib and the Miss sahib. But it seems they did not know of you, and thought that only we four were there.

‘And I asked her if she could help me to escape, and she said that there might be a way, but that we must wait. I also asked her if she could get a message to you, because the sahibs had ways of speaking to each other by writing, of which she knew naught, and that there would be paper in the sahib’s pocket, for she had taken his coat. And I told her to give it to the sahib, and if he made marks on it to drop it outside the caves, because I knew you would come to look for us. After that she left me, and for a long time I lay there alone by the flame in the wall, which burned without fuel. And sometimes one or other of the devil people came and looked at me and spoke, but I could not understand all they said, and told them lies.

‘At last she came back — it must have been many hours after — and gave me more food, and told me that they were going to kill the sahib first and us later. I do not know what they were going to do to him, since I could not understand all her words, but it seems there is something else in the caves besides the devil people — a devil of sorts to whom they will give him.

‘She then asked me, if I could get out, could I bring help? And I said perhaps, since, except for Baz Khan, who had taken the sahib’s, they had no guns. She did not understand what a gun was, though. Then she told me that she had seen Saunders sahib, and he had made marks on the piece of paper, and she had dropped it out of the caves. But she

did not know what it was, and she had to take it quickly, since Baz Khan came there while the sahib was writing.'

I explained to Gulab that we had got the message, and told him what was in it.

'She did not know if you were there, but she hoped you would come,' he went on, 'and she tied the message in the sahib's handkerchief, so that you would see it. It seems that the devil people do not go out of the caves much, save at certain seasons to work in their fields, and that is generally by moonlight. But they saw us the first day, and so that night went out to our camp, and next night made the raid.

'Then she loosed my bonds, and made me follow her through many passages until we came out on to the hills. I could see but little, for there was no light, but the woman did not seem to mind the darkness. Once in the open we came over the hills to where the water falls down, and there she showed me a path under the waters, which, following, I came out on this side, and so made my way along the bank to the bridge. And to-morrow at midday she will be waiting in the place I left her to guide us if I can get help, for to-morrow evening they will give the sahib to the devil, or whatever it is in there.'

The account was not too coherent, and he could tell us nothing as to who the 'devil people,' as he called them, were, or how long they had been there. The only thing that was clear was the unpleasant nature of the brutes. He said the whole mountain seemed a warren of passages, and that we should not stand much chance if we were caught there. Questioned as to their numbers, he was not able to give very definite replies, but thought there might have been a hundred, men and women, in all, but

that the men were more numerous than the women. They seemed not to have any arms worth talking of, which was a comfort. Some old swords and spears, very rusty, were carried by some, while others seemed only to have rude tools like axes and spades, and some seemed to have none at all.

Having been kept in the woman's cave most of the time, he had only seen them in the big hall he spoke of, and had not had time enough to get much information as to their habits.

Eventually I told him to go and rest, and sent the messenger to Frank. It was all very mysterious, and we could make but little of it, save that there clearly existed a colony of what seemed to be primitive savages whose chief was a Punjabi ex-soldier, and among whom was a woman who did not belong to them, but was apparently a Gujar, kidnapped as a child many years before. She was the most hopeful factor in the situation, since her apparent enmity with Baz Khan and the power she seemed to wield might be of considerable use to us.

There was also the very definite fact, which we knew both from Saunders's message and Gulab Khan's words, that some peril hung over the two prisoners, though what the thing was to whom they proposed to hand over Saunders next evening — or rather this evening, since it was now close on two o'clock — we had not the vaguest idea.

Neither Valerie nor I were disposed to go to bed again after what we had heard, and we sat there for a while discussing the story, and trying to fit in some kind of theory to account for it. There was no doubt about the red stones — those we had seen — and we had the knowledge that the actual specimen which Frank had found was a ruby, and there was every

reason to suppose that the others were also. We knew now, too, that there was a whole maze of passages in the hill, which certainly pointed to some old mine workings.

'I think that there is no doubt they must be the remnant of the original people who worked the mines,' said Valerie at last. 'They're probably the descendants of the slaves that Captain Saunders suggested, and their ways seem to point to it. If they are, I wonder how they got left there?'

'Probably had nowhere to go to, and had been there so long they didn't know what to do when they were free,' I suggested. 'Anyway, if they are, then they're not likely to be very stout fighters, which is something. We ought to be able to tackle them all right if we can only find the way in and come on them unexpectedly.'

I don't know that I had any real reasons for supposing that, but it was a comforting theory that the descendants of slaves would probably be cowardly. Certainly if we could get them in the light and in the open we could deal with them with our guns. But in the dark at close quarters they would be nothing like so easy if they showed fight. Moreover, they might easily kill the two prisoners long before we could reach them.

One thing was quite clear now, and that was that we should have to take the chance offered us by Gulab rather than the forlorn hope of attempting to force the cave entrance. But I thought that this time we would not all go together as we had originally proposed. The coolies were of no use to us, and if five men could do the job, then four could do it equally well. Frank must clearly stop behind, so that if anything happened to us he could get Valerie

away, and then report the whole thing. But it would be at least six weeks before any troops could come up, and by that time Saunders and the rest of us would have lost interest — to put it mildly.

In the end I usurped Valerie's usual prerogative by sending her to bed, and sat waiting for Frank to come, but it was close on four o'clock before I heard Fateh Khan's challenge from the stairs, and presently saw Frank and Karima entering the ruined gateway at the head of them.

I told him briefly what had happened, and we had Gulab up and made him go through his story once more, but we got no further information of any value.

Then we got down to settling the details of our plan. Frank agreed with me that it was no good all of us going, since this would be more a job for a small party, as we were apparently going to be admitted secretly. Also it might be a trap, in which case we stood no chance at all, anyway.

'Gulab, of course, must go, since he knows the way,' said Frank. 'We can give him Saunders's Mannlicher. It's lucky that they only took the express and the shot-gun that day. Then Fateh Khan must go; you can arm him with one of your guns. I've left Lal Singh with my express, and Rassula with my shot-gun holding the gorge, but we can give that up now. I'll send Karima back as soon as it's light to fetch the other two, and Rassula must come with us. If anything happens to us and we're not back by morning, you'll have to do the best you can to get Valerie away.'

It was just like Frank to insist on taking the lead in that cool fashion, and I protested strongly, pointing out that I was the man to go and he the one to

stay and look after his sister. But he was absolutely obdurate on the point at first, and it was only after a long time that he could be induced to toss for it.

We tossed for it in the dawn light with a rupee which I happened to have in my pocket. I tossed and he called, and I don't know whether I was glad or sorry when the thing lay still after spinning across the hard ground, and I saw good King George's honest features looking up at me. Frank had called 'Tails.'

We settled that we would start at ten-thirty — Fateh Khan, Rassula, Gulab, and myself. Frank would give us till eight next morning, and if we were not back by then he would make for civilisation as fast as he could. If we were caught in the passage, or if it was a trap, even then, from what we had seen and heard of the enemy, he should not have much to fear in the open, with the exception of Baz Khan. They wouldn't know how to use our rifles even if they got them, it seemed, since the woman did not even know the word, and they apparently had none of their own.

'Well, that's settled,' said I at last. 'It's getting on for five now, and I'm going to have a sleep. Tell Ghulama to get some breakfast for me at nine. I'm dead tired.'

Then I pulled my valise under a rock that promised shade for several hours yet — the cellars below were too foul-smelling to sleep in — and settled down to try and make up a little of the arrears of the past two days. Despite my boast that I don't sleep by day, I got to sleep at once, although the dawn had fully broken and the sun was already on the topmost peaks, and slept unbrokenly for nearly four hours, until Frank turned me out, saying that break-

fast was ready, and I rolled out of my valise, slipped on my chaplis, and joined him and Valerie on the rock where Taj Muhammad had spread out the meal, with Dog Bill looking hopeful in the offing.

CHAPTER XII

MASALAN

LAL SINGH and Rassula had returned, and were talking busily to Gulab as we sat down to breakfast, the green-eyed Punjabi looking considerably brighter already after getting food, some sleep, and some clothes. He was going over the bolt of Saunders's Mannlicher as he talked, and I imagine he was hoping to get a fair bead on his scoundrelly cousin before the day was out.

It was a clear, cloudless day, and the great plain and the snow-clad hills around us seemed rather too fresh and beautiful for the happenings that were taking place. The distant green of the fir woods, the glittering snow against the vivid blue of the sky, the noise of the water in its rocky bed below us, were more intimately connected with peaceful days after ibex or markhor than with the game we were going to stalk to-day.

Breakfast over, I collected my party. There was Gulab with the Mannlicher, Fateh Khan with my double-express, and lastly, Rassula with my shot-gun, a dozen lethal cartridges, and as many more buck-shot ones. Frank wanted to give me Lal Singh, but I argued that it was better he should keep one fighting man with him in case of anything happening to us. Rassula had shown that he was not devoid of courage, and at close range in the caves the shot-gun in his hands would probably be as effectual as a rifle in those of Lal Singh's.

A few last words with Frank and Valerie, and

then away we filed down the narrow ledge on the face of the rock, my last glimpse of the party above being one of Valerie holding Dog Bill.

We followed the ravine bank towards the great fall that we had explored on the first day, and came eventually to the narrow gorge that concealed the fall. But instead of entering it, Gulab, who was leading us, made his way up the steep slope to the side — a slope that some few hundred feet higher up ended under a sheer rock face which appeared to be quite impossible to climb. But when he reached the foot of it he turned to his left, and, picking his way among the great boulders that littered the steep hillside, followed a narrow ledge, which seemed to end abruptly in the great outcrop of rock forming the wall of the gorge.

I caught him up just as we neared the end of the ledge, and asked him where he was leading us.

‘There is a hole in the rock here, sahib, just by those little bushes there. I marked it by those white stones in the moonlight last night.’

And sure enough in another minute, pushing aside a clump of dwarf growths, he pointed to a crevice in the rock, a rough hole — evidently a natural fissure — into which he entered on hands and knees, the rest of us following.

It opened out after three or four yards until we could stand upright in a narrow tunnel, where my electric-torch came in very useful. Another fifty yards and we saw light ahead, a dim light, and heard the rushing noise of falling water. A little more and then we emerged into the spray-laden air of the great shaft, and saw in front of us the liquid sheet of the great fall.

It was a treacherous place, for the tunnel opened

out on to a little platform only a few feet square, beyond which a still narrower ledge led onward apparently into the heart of the fall, and, leaning over, we saw nearly a hundred sheer feet below us the narrow bank above the great pool.

‘And where now?’ I turned to Gulab, and heard Fateh Khan’s exclamation of wonder and doubt as Gulab pointed along the ledge.

‘Along there, behind the water.’

And with that he set out across the ledge, here only a bare two feet wide, with, on the one hand, the wall of smooth slimy rock, and on the other, the sheer drop into the boiling pool below. But after another few feet the void below us was veiled by the falling wall of water as we passed behind it, a translucent screen that, had it touched us, would have swept us off our ledge as a mop sweeps sleepy flies off a window-pane. We glued ourselves closer to the inner wall, less now from fear of the gulf beneath than from fear of the falling water, which lay only a couple of feet from the edge of the path.

The noise was deafening, and the whole rock seemed to quiver beneath our feet, and we were all unfeignedly glad when we emerged on the other side of the fall to enter a tunnel much like the one we had just left, but a short one this time, which opened out on to a narrow little nullah leading onward up to the great peaks ahead.

‘We go along this, sahib, for a little way, and then we come to a big cave, in which there is a passage, and there we should find the woman waiting,’ explained Gulab, as we came out into the daylight. ‘This nullah is hidden from the view of any of the devil people who might be sitting near the place where you watched.’

We followed him up the nullah, and then presently, nearly three quarters of a mile it must have been, we came to a steep slope heaped with great boulders brought down by the melting ice and snow, and saw before us the dark archway of a big cave. It was a desolate spot, no sign of vegetation save a few little rock plants, and in the spring probably none too safe from avalanches, overhung as it was at the end by a great slope running upwards to the snow wall above. Probably at times it was filled with water from the melting snow, but at present there was only a small trickle, for the bulk of the snow water evidently made its way down to the falls through a bigger valley lying slightly higher to our right and leading off at the level of the cave.

As we reached the cave we caught sight of a figure squatting by the side of a big boulder that half blocked the entrance, and my rifle went forward mechanically and the safety-catch slid over. But as the figure rose to its feet I saw that it was the woman who had dropped the handkerchief, still clothed in the same rough kilt-like skirt, and with the ropes of red stones about her neck.

She stood there in the sunlight at the mouth of the cave, a slim straight figure, the red stones catching the light in dull gleams of crimson that set off her rather barbaric beauty, as with one hand she pushed back the long black tresses that swept down below her waist.

She surveyed us curiously for an instant, and then spoke in Balti, which I don't know. Gulab answered her, and they talked for a moment, and her tone was that of some one accustomed to give orders, sharp and clear, free from the rather plaintive or occasionally shrew-like intonation of the Eastern woman.

Looking at her straight features and limbs, the wild grace of her bearing, the high poise of her well-modelled chin, I could imagine that Baz Khan might well covet her. She was a natural mother of fighting sons, and as such would attract a soldier of the Punjab, quite apart from her distinct beauty.

I asked Gulab what she was saying, whereupon she turned her attention to me, looking me up and down.

‘She asks what can four men hope to do against so many this evening when they give the sahib to the devil thing.’

‘Tell her that we four men have guns, and can do much if she will but lead us to a place where we can come upon them unawares at a little distance.’

‘I have told her of the guns, but she does not understand what they are.’

‘Can she lead us to where the sahib is?’

She clicked her tongue — an unmistakable oriental negative — as he translated and answered him.

‘Not now. There are too many around him; but if we go with her she will take us to a place where we can wait, and when the sun sinks they will bring him there, and maybe if we can prevail against the devil thing and against Baz Khan and the men of the caves, we might rescue the sahib.’

‘And what is the devil thing of which she speaks?’

‘I do not know, sahib. I do not know the name she gives it; but it is very large and very strong, and has killed many men, and the people fear it much. It lives in a hole in the rock between her cave and that of the others.’

This was not very illuminating. But the modern rifle rather discounts devils of any sorts, and, anyway, there was nothing for it but to trust the woman

and do whatever she suggested. So I made Gulab do his best to explain to her that if we could be brought within sight of the devil we would settle with it.

Followed a wordy demonstration by the Punjabi, at parts of which the woman looked frankly incredulous. I imagine that he was trying to explain the power of his rifle to her.

Finally, however, she shrugged her shoulders as one engaged on a hopeless task, and, signing to us to follow her, led into the cave, at the rear of which opened a rock-hewn tunnel, unmistakably the work of men. It was pitch dark in an instant, but she trod unhesitatingly ahead of us, and evinced considerable surprise, and I think some contempt, when I produced my electric-torch.

Though probably only a quarter of an hour or so in reality, it seemed hours before we got to the end of that tunnel, inky black, though the air was reasonably fresh, and at times there seemed to be a distinct draught. It is hard to tell how you are going in the dark, but the general impression was that we were working steadily uphill.

We came out at the end into a group of natural caves in the heart of the mountain — caves that at some past time had been worked upon to some extent, for there were niches excavated in the walls presumably for storing things, rough-hewn ledges around the walls that might have been for sleeping on, and were evidently still used as such, for on some of them were a few rough blankets; and there, as we entered, the woman touched something, and a sliding stone door ground to behind us — a door that fitted so well as to be practicably indistinguishable from the other rock-cut niches. Fearing a trap, I

made her show us the mechanism — a simple counterpoise — and not till I had tested it several times did we go forward.

Then in the last cave, where our guide stopped as though we had reached the end of our journey, we came into the red glow of a great fire — a fire that sprang in a sheet of flame from a hole in the wall, and appeared to burn without any fuel. At least so it seemed at first, until closer examination revealed the fact that there was a natural flow of oil from crevices in the rock, which was led by channels into a trough. The fumes and smoke escaped upwards into a fissure in the rock, presumably to lose themselves somewhere higher up in the mountain. From later inquiries it seemed that the fire had always been there as far as the woman knew, and the flame had burnt continuously since she had first entered the cave, which was reserved for the woman who tended the idol Gulab had spoken of.

The cave was bare, save for a pile of very coarse blankets, evidently woven of goat-hair; some rough-tanned hides, with the hair still on, which served as coverings; and a few dishes of the coarsest earthenware.

The air was very warm, and one could understand how in such cover the people of the caves could face the rigours of the mountain winters, even with a minimum of clothing such as our guide wore.

Feeling that it was about time to get an idea of what the proposed plan of rescue was, I told Gulab to find out what she intended that we should do, feeling most intensely the annoyance of having to work through an interpreter in the extremely ticklish situation. One could not avoid a feeling of extreme helplessness cooped up in the darkness of this

warren of caves, heaven only knew how many hundred feet underground, dependent for everything on the goodwill of a most primitive-looking kind of female.

She had squatted down near the blaze, playing the while with a short knife that hung at her girdle, and from time to time stretching her hands to the flame, the dancing red light playing across her features and catching the barbaric ornaments she wore, while the rest of us stood round, utterly out of place in our more or less civilised clothes — even Rassula had a khaki coat.

Eventually after half an hour's three-cornered talking I got at what was to happen. A little way from the cave we were in was the place where the devil thing lived — I began to suspect by this time that it was not a man, but clearly some kind of animal, though what exactly was not clear. The pit lay between these caves and the ones where the rest of the cave people lived, and none of them dared to cross it.

Above the pit was a ledge, on which we could lie hidden until they let down Saunders into it. Apparently his captors would be on the other side watching the show. The only way of crossing the pit was by means of a plank, which the woman was in the habit of drawing over to her own side if she wished for extra security from the attentions of any of the other cave-dwellers.

If, as we had said, we could really kill men at a distance, then we were to deal with the thing in the pit, and, if necessary, with the men on the other side, and let down a rope which she had provided to Saunders below.

She mentioned about sundown as the probable

time, but as they might possibly begin before, it would be well to be there somewhat earlier. A glance at my wrist-watch showed that we still had several hours in hand, but nevertheless I was anxious to get there as soon as possible in case of any accident.

Asked if she could get a message to Saunders to tell him that help was at hand, she shook her head. Baz Khan was suspicious, it seemed, and Saunders was closely guarded ever since the Punjabi had found her talking to him — trying to talk, I suppose I should say, since Saunders only had about three words of Balti, signifying 'get a move on now,' or words to that effect, as they say in the courts.

She had sent away the women who usually lived with her, so as to be alone when we came, and there was now no one but herself on this side of the pit, while all the cave people were probably sitting round the prisoners. She did not think that they would put Gobind Singh down with Saunders, because they would want to save him for a later occasion.

I had carefully noted the passage up which we came, and made sure that there were no side entrances — a very reassuring fact, since the idea of being cut off was not attractive. All the same, it would be a good thing to keep a very close watch on Masalan, as the woman called herself, and I told off Fateh Khan for that duty.

After we had settled what we were to do, she asked a large number of questions as to who we were, why we had come there, and so on, talk all very much at cross-purposes, since she did not seem to have any conception of any form of world except the caves, with some dim recollections of an earlier life in a shepherd's camp. Wondering how she could have been captured originally, I asked if the other people

in the caves knew of the path by which she had brought us, to which she replied that no one, not even her own women, were aware of its existence or of the sliding-door leading to it.

Up till two winters ago — they measured their time by seasons — there had been a point where the cliffs beyond the fall could be climbed, but the rock had broken away as the result of a landslide, and since then the people of the caves had not been able to get out of their valley at all. Not that they ever desired to go out much; only a few of the bolder spirits had occasionally ventured forth at rare intervals in search of wild animals, or, still more rarely, to loot straying sheep from the flocks of the Gujars.

Of the origin of the cave people she apparently knew nothing, except that they had always been there. 'Always' seemed an elastic term with her. They had some old stories that once upon a time they had been under great tyranny, and some 'iron-clothed' men forced them to live in the caves and dig for the red stones such as she wore. Later they had overcome the 'iron-clothed' men, who had gone away, and some of the cave people had fled with them, but the others had stayed. But none of those now in the caves — not even the oldest — remembered the 'iron-clothed' men.

At the time I was too worried thinking about how we could rescue Saunders and the Sikh to give her words proper attention, but it was pretty clear that our theories as to the mines and the slave labour were receiving ample confirmation, and later on received a good deal more. But she had, of course, no idea of dates. Everything was either a 'long, long time,' or else two or three or sometimes four winters ago.

The passage entrance to the ledge behind the fall through which we had come had not apparently been known to her predecessor, and she herself had stumbled on the secret of the sliding-rock door accidentally the previous winter. It seemed hard to understand why she had not taken advantage of it to escape, but apparently she had no desire to leave the caves — after all, she knew nothing of the outside world — where she had been contented enough until Baz Khan came. Up till that time she had held considerable influence with the cave people, who seemed to practise a mixture of devil and idol worship, doubtless the remnants of a very debased form of Lamaistic Buddhism — there were probably large numbers of Ladakhis among them in the beginning.

Eventually I suggested that she had now better lead us to the ledge above the pit, so that we could get into position, and, leaving the firelit cave, we followed her along a similar rock-hewn tunnel to the one by which we had entered, until, still in darkness, we came out into an open space, where just in front the light of my torch revealed a black gulf, and Masalan signed to us to stop.

It was a pit some thirty feet across and nearly as much in depth, on the farther lip of which one could dimly make out an arched opening leading on again into the darkness beyond, while above our heads a great cleft swept up into the gloom — a cleft to which we could make out no roof whatever. The rays of the torch just died out in the blackness above. The pit stretched some fifty or sixty yards from rock wall to rock wall, and at one side a tunnel a few feet high ran in under the wall.

There was a putrid smell, the cause of which was clear enough when turning the torch beams down-

wards we saw littered about the uneven rock floor bones and skulls, and in one place a foot of more recent origin, a fact which convinced me that the devil of which Masalan had spoken would be sure to turn out a wild animal of sorts, since the carnivora generally leave the extremities of the kill untouched.

But there was no sign of the occupant of the pit, who was presumably somewhere at the end of the tunnel, whose mouth showed dark and grim below us. On the right as we stood there a rough ledge ran along the wall above the pit, ending abruptly some six feet short of the farther lip, and lying on the ledge was the plank with which the remainder of the way could be bridged at will.

The ground sloped upward to the edge of the pit, ending in a wall of stone — a wall some eighteen inches high and evidently of considerable age. I wondered if in the old days the masters of the mines were in the habit of sitting there for similar performances to the one we were about to witness. The litter of bones below us must have taken many years to accumulate, and the present population could not have contributed them all.

I put Gulab at the corner by the ledge, settled Fateh Khan and Rassula with the rope in the centre, with orders not to let Masalan leave them, and took up my position between them and Gulab. The plan decided on was simple enough. On the arrival of the cave people with Saunders we would lie quiet until he was actually let down into the pit. Fateh Khan and Rassula were forthwith to let down the rope while I shouted to him to run for it; Gulab was to make sure of any one from the other side who tried to cross the ledge, while I would tackle the thing that lived in the tunnel.

Once we had dragged Saunders out, our future action would depend upon what news we could get of Gobind Singh.

We should have light enough to see by, since Masalan said that before they let down Saunders they would drop in lighted bundles of straw and other material to illuminate the place.

I put out my torch, and, with strict caution to the others to keep quiet, settled down to await events. It still wanted over two hours to sundown, but we could not be sure that there might not be some early comers. A prisoner was presumably a rare occurrence, and there might be an early scramble for seats, so to speak. Inky blackness fell as the torch went out, but after a while, with eyes more accustomed to it, we realised that there was the faintest of faint grey light filtering down from the cleft above, just enough light to enable one to see one's hand at about a foot from one's face, no more; and with the darkness a silence that hung about us like a pall.

CHAPTER XIII

WE RESCUE SAUNDERS

WE had lain there for over an hour before the least sound broke the heavy silence, and then it was only the faintest noise of movement on the farther side of the pit, the soft shuffling of naked feet. But no light showed, and the creature — man, woman, child, or beast — seemed not to mind the darkness. Presently the sound ceased, only to be replaced an instant later by more similar sounds and shuffling movements on the opposite ledge, as though people were arranging themselves along it. Then once or twice there were guttural exclamations and low laughs.

It was uncanny to lie there in the darkness knowing that there on the farther side the cave people were assembling seemingly quite at home without any glimmer of light to guide them, and still more uncanny to catch their voices drifting across the pit and to hear the short laughs die out in the void above.

I only hoped that Gulab would not go completely off his head if later on he caught sight of his cousin, who would presumably be well to the fore when the performance began. I had impressed upon all the party, and upon him in particular, the vital importance of keeping hidden until Saunders was in the pit where we might get at him.

Then I fell to wondering again what the devil thing in the tunnel below was, and, despite my common sense, which insisted that it could be but a

wild animal of some familiar kind, weird ideas crept through my mind, memories of stories of forgotten monsters, underground horrors of all sorts, prehistoric survivals — anything seemed possible in that dark charnel-house.

Then far off down the cave passage on the opposite side showed a faint red gleam — a wavering gleam — that grew and grew until one could make out the separate flames of several torches borne by wild figures, and catch the sing-song chants of the bearers. And as the torch-bearers drew nearer to the entrance of the tunnel, the reflected glow of their torches showed the row of figures squatting on the opposite lip of the pit. Then the torch-men emerged and spread themselves along the farther side and behind them, still in the tunnel, showed other lights and other figures.

The red glow of the torches fell on the squatting figures in front, and a wilder gathering I have never seen. There were men and women and one or two children, all pallid of skin and small of frame, all with long matted hair and dull flat faces, but with eyes that even at that distance seemed curiously large in a corner of the world where slit eyes are the rule.

They were sketchily clothed in the coarsest of rags, or in skins of goats, with here and there the red of fox, and one man was draped in a snow leopard skin, for which many a sportsman would have gladly given up six months' leave. They were dirty beyond conception, but they did not look in any way ill-fed. But they were impassive and animal to a degree, and the occasional snarling laughs as they looked back into the tunnel behind them or down into the pit below only heightened the impression of a pack of jackals waiting round a stricken beast.

Such ornaments as they wore were barbaric enough, amulets of the type that Masalan had and such as Frank had found; but the dull red shimmer showed what they were, unmistakably the rubies whose search had landed us into this appalling misadventure.

Then suddenly a renewed chatter and buzz of talk as another group of men emerged from the tunnel, men similarly clad, with at their head a tall figure whose features were strangely like those of Gulab Khan, only cruel and wolfish to a degree. By the fact that he wore what were unmistakably Saunders's shirt, shorts, and stockings, and carried Saunders's double-express in his hands, and the fact that alone of all the men there he had roughly bobbed hair, I concluded that Baz Khan had made his appearance, and cast a hurried anxious glance towards Gulab. But that worthy was playing the game so far, and lay motionless in his corner.

The group opened out, and there in the centre, with his hands bound behind him and two of the cave men holding a rope knotted about his throat, was Saunders, a very un-Saunders-like Saunders, with his bare chest and legs and the tattered remains of a pair of short drawers, his usually faultlessly brushed hair all tousled over his forehead and two days' growth on his chin. But the light in his eyes and the defiant turn of his head, even with the rope about his neck, spoke to the fact that the Saunders of the old war days was still undaunted.

They hauled him to the edge of the pit, and with gleeful grimaces pointed down to the piles of bones below and to the dark tunnel, peering into the prisoner's face to see if he showed any signs of fear, and laughing and chattering to each other the while.

I took stock of the crowd again to see how they

were armed, and was grateful to see no guns, not even the most antiquated of matchlocks. Rough spears, crude knives, and a few old tulwars seemed to be all they boasted; but one fellow, bigger than the rest, who stood close to Baz Khan, sported a steel cap with point and chain neck-piece, rusty and dented, but unmistakably of old workmanship. I wondered who the original owner had been, and whether perhaps the steel cap had once adorned the head of that pitiable figure we had seen walled in the ice. I noticed also that in the man's hand was — unless it was its twin brother — Gulab's beloved axe.

Saunders stood there like a statue under it all, there in the middle of that crowd of savages, his lean face even gaunter than usual, with the long smear of dried blood down one cheek. I never quite realised before what courage the man had till now, when we saw him face to face with what looked like the end, and, as far as he knew, no hope of help whatever. Once when one of the men prodded his ribs with the butt of a spear he looked as though he would leap forward even with his bound hands, but I suppose he realised the futility of movement, for he stayed still.

Then Baz Khan, who had been talking to the man in the old steel cap, stepped forward with an evil smile on his face, and held up his hand for silence, while the crowd hushed as he turned to some men behind him with bundles of reeds and coarse mountain-grass.

They lit one of them from a torch and flung it down at the mouth of the tunnel, where it flamed up, lighting up the pit and the tunnel entrance. The flames and smoke mounted in eddies, veiling for an instant or two the crowd on the ledge above. Then

a still silence fell as down the tunnel came a long grunting 'whoof,' and with a rush a dark shambling mass shot out past the blaze, a great hairy mass, that suddenly stopped and squatted back, nose up, sniffing at the men above.

It was the biggest red bear I have ever seen in my life — bigger far than anything that Rowland Ward ever listed in his records. Literally it looked like a small elephant squatting there amid the piles of bones, its great mouth a red slobbering cavern lined with blunted yellow teeth. It was mangy, and its once fine coat was bare in places, showing roughened red skin in wrinkles, but its ribs were still well covered.

The men above flung down another bundle of lighted grass, and then the mob opposite began to stir up the bear. They sat there like apes tormenting a panther, flinging down pebbles and refuse of all sorts — bits of bone, or occasionally small bits of lighted wood — anything that might work the beast into a frenzy.

Presently, after one or two stones had taken effect on its mangy coat, it shambled about again, pawing at the walls and rearing its full height in fruitless endeavours to get at its tormentors above, and there was no mistaking its temper. Captivity far from taming it seemed to have rendered it extremely savage.

Then they hauled Saunders to the edge of the pit and pointed out the bear to him, with a flow of doubtless mocking remarks.

I wondered if they were going to let him down with his hands bound, but apparently that would have been too dull an amusement, for several men seized him hand and foot, while others freed his

wrists, still keeping the rope about his throat. Then they passed a loose rope under his armpits, and six of them carried him spread-eagle towards the middle of the ledge, and held him out over it while they released the rope from his neck.

The bear was just below them rearing up and pawing at the wall, and Baz Khan seeing this, spoke to some of them, evidently telling them to drive it away, for they flung down a torch, which hit the beast on the head, and sent it shambling off for the moment to our side; and, seizing the chance, the men holding Saunders dropped him altogether, and he fell half a dozen feet till brought up short by the rope under his arms.

The bear edged back from our side, evidently scenting something, and then they let Saunders down hand over hand till he landed heavily on his feet. He seemed to have made up his mind what to do, for as his feet touched the ground he slipped from the rope, and sped along the wall away from the bear, waving his arms about to get the circulation back. Then he stooped, picked up a long thigh bone, and turned to face the beast now close upon him, but one could see that his arms were still somewhat cramped and useless.

The mob of men and women above were all craning over in their excitement to see the end, shouting and gesticulating as the bear reared up on its hind feet with forepaws out and mouth wide open, when Saunders leapt forward and smote at its snout with the bone in his hand. At the same moment I pressed my trigger, and the bullet smashed home in the bear's throat, so that the beast lurched forward on top of Saunders, bearing him to the ground.

Simultaneously I heard Gulab fire, and caught

sight of Baz Khan wringing his arm as the double-express he held fell into the pit. He had turned just as Gulab fired, and the bullet, instead of taking him in the chest, had caught the breech of his rifle and torn it from his grasp.

An instant later Fateh Khan let drive across the pit, and the man in the steel cap flung up his arms, spun slowly round, and pitched backward over the edge straight on top of Saunders and the bear.

I jumped to my feet and shouted to Saunders, who, covered with the beast's blood, was extricating himself from the quivering hairy mass above him, and as I did so saw Baz Khan jumping for the shelter of the passage behind him as Gulab fired once more, and Fateh Khan and Rassula dropped two men together in the passage mouth.

That settled them, and, dropping torches, the mob fled — a packed, screaming mass — into the darkness of the tunnel, fighting and clawing and jostling to escape the unknown terror of noise beyond the pit.

Fateh Khan had the sense to stop firing then, and he and Rassula let down the rope as Saunders got to his feet, and came running across to our side. It was dark now above, save in one corner, where a torch still flamed in the hand of one of the men Fateh Khan had killed, but in the pit itself the bundles of blazing grass still gave a certain amount of light. Gulab, clean out of control by now, was shooting rapid into the opposite darkness, and once or twice the screams gave evidence to his luck. Then the scurrying noises gave way to silence, only broken in the passage by the sobbing cries of some badly wounded man.

Shouting to Gulab to stop wasting precious ammunition, I turned to where Fateh Khan, Rassula, and

Masalan were pulling Saunders up. At last he reached the top, and grabbing his wrists we hauled him over the low wall, a breathless, dishevelled, blood-smeared figure.

'Hurt, long 'un?' I queried, as he sat panting on the floor, sort of feeling himself all over.

'Think not, Everitt. Thought you coves had missed the bus when they let me down into the zoo without even a halfpenny bun to hand out to the bear. That stinker Baz Khan's got my best shirt, too, blast his ruddy neck. How in hell am I going to meet Miss Weston like this?'

'Don't mind about your damned shirt. Thank God you've got your skin left.'

He'd got to his feet now, and was evidently undamaged, save for the cut across his face. Then we saw Fateh Khan preparing to slip down the rope, and asked him what he was after.

'The sahib's rifle. It's over there by the bear. The big man dropped it,' said he laconically, as he slipped down and walked across the pit to pick up the weapon, stopping to look at the bear, which was now stone dead, with the steel-capped man, a still twisted heap beside it, Gulab's axe lying near him.

We pulled him up again, and he handed us the rifle, the stock smashed off short behind the breech, but otherwise seemingly undamaged as far as we could see in the dying light of the grass fires. As an afterthought he went back and got Gulab's axe.

'Where's Gobind Singh?' I asked.

'Can't say. I haven't seen him since the swine took us. We've got to find him somehow or other, though. But how the devil did you get here?'

'Gulab got out with the help of the woman there — lady by the name of Masalan, who seems friendly.

She dropped your chit to us and helped Gulab out, and he showed us a new way in.'

'Well, now we'd better go and look for Gobind. Give me a gun of sorts. Oh, there's Gulab with my Mannlicher!' He took the weapon. 'God! it's good to feel one's fingers on a bolt again.' And that was the only sign he gave of what he must have been through.

But the question of looking for Gobind was settled for the moment by the report of a gun from the passage opposite and a spatter of buckshot on the rock about us. As we flung ourselves under the wall I heard Saunders mutter —

'Lucky the blighter had the express at the beginning.'

We all let drive into the dark mouth of the passage, but the only result was a mocking laugh and another shot, a lethal bullet this time that smashed against the wall just by Saunders's head.

We decided then that it was not much good trying to force our way in at the moment. Baz Khan was strongly posted, and we had no means of light other than my torch, for in another few minutes the last of the grass would have burnt itself out.

The only thing was to go back to the fort, refit Saunders, and then make up some kind of plan for dealing with Baz Khan and rescuing the Sikh.

'He can't get across the ledge so long as there's some one here, and there's clearly no other way round. We'll leave Gulab, Rassula, and Fateh Khan here to hold him, and we'll get back as quick as we can. I think we'll take Masalan along with us, too, so that we can question her as to what the inside of the place is like.'

I had some difficulty in making Saunders agree.

He was most anxious to cross the pit and turn Baz Khan out into the open, a perfectly hopeless proposition at the moment, it seemed to me, and I said so forcibly several times. What was wanted was something a bit more wily than that, and for the moment I had no plan ready. I wanted Frank to come along and lend a hand.

I explained the situation to the three men, and put Fateh Khan in charge. Their sole business was to prevent Baz Khan or any one else getting across the pit, and, of course, if chance offered, to kill the Punjabi, a task for which Gulab needed no incitement. It took a very firm hand to prevent him running the plank across the ledge and trying to cross and settle matters with the axe he had so luckily recovered.

I left them my electric torch, for some kind of light was necessary, and told them we should be back again in the early morning, if not before. Then Saunders and I followed Masalan along the passage, our going speeded by a chance shot from Baz Khan, which ricocheted along the roof over our heads.

There was considerably more respect in Masalan now after the proof of what the guns could do, and I think she was inwardly frightened. Of course, we were unable to talk to her, but when we came out into the light of her cave there was less assurance in her bearing, and perhaps a little awe. But she had her wits about her all the time, for she picked up one of the rough blankets, and handed it to Saunders, who flung it about his shoulders.

‘Better take another, long ‘un,’ said I. ‘It’s perishing cold outside.’

He helped himself to another with rather a moue of disgust, grumbling the while —

'Why in Hades didn't you bring some spare kit for me? You might have thought of that.'

I couldn't help a smile at this very typical speech. We had got him out alive by the skin of his teeth, and here he was grouching because we hadn't had the forethought to bring his dressing-case along with us. I hoped Valerie would meet us, so that I might have the joy of seeing him huddled in his blankets trying to avoid her.

But he was already busy with an earthenware bowl of water trying to clean up the mess the bear had made over him, and washing the blood from the cut on his cheek which he had presumably got during the scrap outside his tent the first night.

'I suppose she hasn't got a looking-glass,' said he as he finished washing. I don't imagine Masalan had ever even heard of a mirror, and said so, at which he became even more dejected as he tried to part his hair by feel with his hands. Then he found an old pair of worn grass shoes in a corner of the cave, and knotted them on to his feet.

'Come along, anyhow; you can make yourself presentable when we get to the fort. Your kit's there.'

He was persuaded to come eventually, and the three of us followed the passage out to the cave and the open air into the silver moonlight that fell on rock and ice and snow above us, a crisp cold night with a full moon.

It was easy going to the fall, but the passage behind the water was distinctly unpleasant in the gloom, for very little of the moonlight got into the narrow shaft. But Saunders forgot all about grouching during that part, balanced on the narrow ledge behind the great cascade. It wasn't until the three

of us were some way along the path to the fort that he remembered his wrongs again, and relapsed into a gloomy silence.

He broke it just as we reached the fort, and heard Lal Singh's challenge above.

'I say, old man' — the voice was positively plaintive — 'you go first, will you, and just get Miss Weston out of the light.'

It's wonderful how misadventures take some people. But his cup of sorrow was not yet quite full. The last drop in it was the fact that Frank and Valerie, hearing our voices, were half way down the stairs in no time, and the moon was very bright just at the corner where we met.

Then he fled — a tousled figure in flapping blankets — and we saw him no more for the next half hour, but we heard him shouting for hot water and his suitcase, and Taj Muhammad and the cook led a hectic life, while I was recounting to Frank and Valerie the adventures of the night, Masalan squatting by us with her eyes glued on Valerie the whole while.

'And now we've got to think out some other scheme,' said Frank as I finished. 'The next move is to get Gobind Singh away somehow or other, and I should say we want to be quick about it.'

'We must get some more information out of Masalan first. Shout for Karima. He's the only one who can talk Balti, since Rassula isn't here. Saunders may be able to give us some details of the place inside, though I haven't heard yet what happened to him. He may have been shut up in a cave all the time.'

'Not much I wasn't; I was the star turn in a peep-show.'

We turned to find him standing just behind us contentedly rubbing his hand on his new-shaven chin, shorts and shirt of comparative cleanness showing beneath my poshtin, which he had taken, and hair beautifully parted.

‘But I want some grub before I tell any one anything. I’ve not had a bite except some foul chupatti for the last forty-eight hours, and I’m famished. I told Taj Muhammad to get a move on quick with anything he could find.’

That worthy arrived with food, and for the next twenty minutes there was comparative silence, until Saunders pushed back his plate and lit a cigarette, with the solemn air of a man who has not tasted tobacco for two mortal days and nights.

CHAPTER XIV

SAUNDERS'S MISADVENTURES

'Now then, long 'un,' said Frank, 'tell us what happened to you. Gulab gave us rather a sketchy account of the camp being rushed, and practically nothing as to what the caves are like inside. We must know more about them, so that we can make up some kind of plan to get Gobind out.'

'Well, as regards the rushing of the camp, there isn't much to say about that, because it was all over so quickly. I woke up in the middle of the night hearing people moving about. I hopped out of bed, came out of my tent, and saw a lot of men, who rushed me before you could say knife.

'I grabbed the first cove who closed. He had a knife in his hand, but I caught his wrist with a ju-jitsu trick I learnt from a Jap once, and he dropped his knife. I picked him up — he was only a worm of a fellow — and smacked him down on a rock, and that was the end of him. The others seemed a bit scared like — not over-stout-hearted any of them — so I made a dive for my rifle. But before I could get the thing they were on to me, the tent came down, and we were all having a dog-fight in the débris.

'About seven of them sat on my head after that — I don't know why some one didn't jab a knife into me — and the next thing was that I found myself out in the moonlight with a blooming fishing-net of ropes round me, and everybody holding on tight to the ends. Then up came a bigger fellow than the rest, and possessed himself of my guns — a villain-

ous-looking Punjabi he was, turned out to be the missing Baz Khan in the end.

‘He looked at me with the nastiest kind of grin on his ugly face, and started talking in Hindustani. I don’t know what lingo the other birds were jabbering, but I couldn’t follow it. He asked me what I was doing there, and if there were any other sahibs about, so I did a bit of quick thinking and told him that there weren’t. You see I was rather afraid that he’d lie up for the rest of you next day.

‘I hoped that Gobind and the others would stick to the yarn. Gobind was trussed up quite close to me, so that he could hear all right, but I couldn’t see Gulab anywhere. However, I gathered later that he’d had the sense to tell the same kind of lie. The coolie didn’t count, because some one had hit him over the head, and he was down and out.

‘Then I asked Baz Khan what he proposed to do about it, pointing out that if he didn’t let us go and hand over everything and make tracks pretty damn quick, he’d have the Kashmir State troops up here, and find himself dangling on the end of a rope in two-twos. I thought I’d better talk big.

‘That merely made him bad-tempered, and he let off a lot of gas about not caring two pins for the Kashmir Durbar, and still less for the Indian Government. He said he was king of this outfit, and from the way the others hopped about when he talked to them, I fancy he was telling something like the truth in that part.

‘He finished up with a pretty little speech to the effect that he’d been waiting a long time to meet a sahib, and that he was going to give me a lovely time. He grinned more than ever over that part. Then he went off to see the kit packed up, and pre-

sently Gobind and I were yanked up and dragged off up the path to the caves, nasty going on one's bare feet.

'When we got under the caves we found a lot of fellows waiting there with torches, and they did a sort of triumphal dance round about. Most of the stunt seemed to be pantomime as to what they were going to do with us later. When they got tired of prodding us with sticks and rusty old spears they tied us on to ropes, and we were hauled up into the caves, the rest following on rough ladders which had been let down.

'We were dragged through a bally rabbit warren of dark passages, mixed up with big caves with fires in them, and eventually came out into a sort of big hall place, where the whole blooming clan were gathered to see the fun — a lot of filthy dirty women and some children, and a few funny old wizened-up grey heads.

'But although I was feeling rather cold inside at the prospect of the future, I couldn't help realising that we had found the rubies all right. Fids of 'em there seemed to be. Nearly every one had some kind of ruby ornament or other — flawed a lot of them, of course, but some really choice stones here and there.

'I caught sight of Gulab then for the first time, and was glad to see that he didn't seem much hurt. I didn't see the coolie, though, and the amiable Baz Khan told me later that as he was nearly dead they just pitched him out of the caves, poor devil.

'They had a big pow-wow after that, quarrelling over what they were going to do, I should say, and scrapping about the division of our kit. This woman turned up then, and apparently had words with Baz

Khan about Gulab. She seems to be a person of some influence there, and it seemed to me that many of the people would rather have followed her, only they were frightened of our Punjabi friend. Eventually, after they'd divided our kit — pinched practically everything we had on, too — she went off with Gulab, and I didn't see him again.

'They tied me up to a ring let into a rock — an old stone ring it was — and then most of them went off except a few horrid old women, who seemed to suffer from insomnia, and spent the night pinching me to see what I was made of and making faces at me.'

'How many of them are there?' queried Frank, the practical minded, as Saunders stopped to light another cigarette.

'One way and another there must have been over a hundred there, more men than women.'

'You haven't told us yet what they're like, either,' put in Valerie.

'They're a weird-looking lot. There's a certain sameness about them in some ways, and yet there are different types. One sure thing is that they're just what we argued they might be, descendants of a mixed population of miners, and in all probability slaves at that. The greater part are mongoloid, Baltis, and Ladakhis, but there were others with more Indian features. Big eyes most of them, though. I suppose that comes from always living underground. Their clothes — such as they had — were of the coarsest, and the knives and spears and things were all pretty crude, and some of them were evidently old stuff. There were a few old pick-heads and crowbars, too, that looked as if they dated from the dark ages.

'They smelt like animals, worse than any of our coolies ever did, and they eat like animals; and when they quarrelled it was rather like a pack of pi-dogs fighting, teeth and nails, and the women mostly as bad as the men. Two of the old crones fell out during the night over the possession of a bit of filthy rag, and it was just like two cats.

'In the morning the place filled up again, and they all sat round in a circle and jabbered. Then along came Baz Khan and made another speech, which seemed to please them quite a lot. It had reference to me; that much I could see. But in one way it was a blessing, since two men appeared with a great big rusty iron collar with a length of chain on it. I was a bit alarmed at first when they stuck the damned thing round my neck, and hitched the end on to the stone ring. But after that they untied my hands and feet, and I was able to stand up and move a bit. Pretty stiff I was, I can tell you. But they're a chicken-hearted lot, because they had about ten men to hold me when they were undoing the ropes, and they all let go and jumped clear together, even though I couldn't move more than two yards with their blasted dog-collar on.

'They brought me some food after that, some coarse chupattis, and some water. Looking back I can see that they wanted me to be in reasonable form for the circus. Baz Khan shooed them away later, and sat down and talked quite amicably. He said they were going to hand me over to the local devil in two days' time, but he wouldn't tell me what sort of devil it was.

'I could see he was trying to frighten me, so I just refused to be frightened, and sketched his future for him, which rather riled him, I think. Then I asked

him what grouse he'd got against the sahibs, and that sent him off the deep end good and proper. He said that he'd been flung out of his regiment and abused by the colonel and lost his pension, and a string of things like that. I could see clearly that he was clean off his head. I should say, although I'm not a doctor, that he's a homicidal maniac.

'When he'd quieted down a bit I asked him what brought him there, and I fancy he rather enjoyed talking about that. He was full of buck over it. Apparently he'd come across another man who'd told him there was lots of treasure up there, and they'd come to find it. Somehow or other — he didn't make clear how — they'd got into the mines and been nabbed by the people inside. It was touch and go at first, and they nearly had their throats cut. However, in the end they got off, and settled down quietly, meaning to get the rubies and bolt, I suppose. I imagine that sitting in the dark brooding over his fancied wrongs eventually sent him off his chump.

'But the great part over which he spread himself was his becoming chief of the cave people. Apparently they have a custom that the chief only holds his job so long as no better man comes along. If one does and challenges the chief, they have to fight it out. The loser is killed, as a matter of course.

'Baz Khan found this out, and tackled the incumbent. Apparently they had it out with knives in the hall, and finally Baz Khan threw the other man or tripped him. That was the part of the story that made me realise I had a maniac talking to me. He gave me the most gruesome kind of details as to how he finally finished off his opponent, and he positively rolled his tongue round the special bits, and the cor-

ners of his mouth were twitching all the time. He showed me the hollow in the rock where he'd finally held the wretched devil down and slowly cut his head off — I gather the other bloke hadn't much kick by then — and pointed to the stains on it, which he said were blood.

'I asked him why he hadn't taken all the rubies he wanted and gone off home, and he explained that this was a much better place than India, where there were police and sahibs and other nuisances. Here he was king, and his word went. The only trouble — here he got quite confidential — was the lack of good-looking women. As chief he had the right to any he wanted, and, anyway, none of the men could take him on, even if he hadn't any right to their particular female belongings.

'But the only one worth having was this Masalan here, and he couldn't touch her because she looked after the local idols, and he wasn't quite sure yet whether he could overcome the cave people's prejudices in the matter. But now that he had the guns all would be well, and as soon as the devil had finished with me and the local priest had done with Gobind, he was going to collect Masalan, and celebrate the marriage by an artistic end to his cousin Gulab, whom he hated even more than the sahibs.

'The other fellow who had come with him didn't want to stop, and when Baz Khan became chief he escaped. Baz Khan, not wanting any one to get out of the place, pursued him, only the man died just as they caught him. At least that's what he says. That was obviously the man you found in the snow, Frank. He'd been helped out by some woman, it seems, and I rather think Baz Khan settled with her when he came home again, because he went off at a

tangent explaining how nice it was to have your fingers round a thin throat and feel the life going out.

‘He got rather confidentially near me at that point, and I was thinking whether I had enough rope to get my fingers on to him. I know one or two Jap tricks that might have given me a chance even with the dog-collar on. But I think he guessed, because he backed away and laughed at me, telling me that I had better save my strength for the devil.

‘He wouldn’t tell me what they were going to do to the other two, but he said I was the most lucky of the three because I was the biggest, and, as the devil was very big, they were going to hand me over to him.

‘He got tired of me after that, and eventually went away, still nursing my express, and I was left alone for a bit. Then your lady friend came along, and I thought I was in for another half-hour or so of examination like the crones of the previous night had given me. Old Kipling’s bit of verse about the “female of the species” came into my head. But presently I realised that she was friendly. She pottered round the cave, evidently to see if any one was about, and then came up hurriedly with a dirty bit of paper. I suppose she must have got it out of my coat.

‘I didn’t know what she wanted, until suddenly I realised that I was expected to write on it. Of course, we couldn’t talk to each other. But there was nothing to write with. Luckily there had been a small fire near by, which I could just reach with my toes by lying down with the chain full stretch, and I managed to hook out a bit of charred stick, with which I scrawled that note. Just as I was signing my name, there were footsteps in the passage, and she grabbed the paper from me and hid it, which was as

well, as who should come along but my friend Baz Khan.

'They had words then, but I must say she stood up to him like a good 'un by the sound of it, and there was no doubt the Punjabi was a little scared of her for all his buck. I'm glad she's got out of it, for I shouldn't like to think of any woman handed over to his gentle little hands.

'I hoped they'd loose me later on, so that I could get a sniff round the place and see what was there. It seemed rather feeble to have come all these miles and got inside the blinkin' mine and not seen anything at all of the show, even if one was going to be chawed up by a devil to finish with.

'But not a bit of it. They kept me chained up to the rock the whole time I was there until this afternoon. Yesterday afternoon I suppose I ought to say, since it must be well after midnight now. That blighter Baz Khan has got my watch also among other things.'

'How did you know the time, then?' I asked. 'The part of the caves we were in were quite dark.'

'Yes, but the hall I was in had a sort of high window in it. It didn't seem to go right into the open, but it let in a faint grey light just enough to see by during the day. I suppose they must clear it of snow after the winter, or perhaps it's on a sheer face that doesn't hold snow. As far as I could see, it was an old air-shaft. The hall was clearly a centre point of the mines, because there were passages running off in all directions.

'Then last evening the whole lot of the creatures gathered round, and an old grey-headed villain that I hadn't noticed before turned up. He had a specially fine lot of amulets and necklaces on — in fact, his

wardrobe consisted of just that and nothing else, if you except the weirdest old sword with a steel glove hilt like you see in museums. I gather he was a person of importance, for they all made way for him when he came up to inspect me. He became a sort of master of ceremonies and superintended them, tying me up again as a preliminary to taking off the dog-collar.

'They stuck a rope round my neck and hauled me along miles of passages into another big hall, where there was a great carved idol. I don't know who it was meant to be, but it was a horrid-looking thing, with some goats' heads lying about the floor. He made a speech there, and they all started chanting; rather creepy it was. Then more dark passages, and eventually we came out on top of the bear-pit. I think the weird old man stopped behind in the hall with the idol. At least I didn't see any more of him.

'And the rest you know as well as I do. As to what we are going to do now, the only thing that I can see is to push Baz Khan out of the tunnel and follow him up until we find Gobind, if they haven't done the poor devil in yet. Anyway, we can clean up the place and settle our Punjabi friend. I'm not going home until I have. That sort of animal has no business on the earth at all.'

'Is it a straight passage?' queried Frank.

'No. That's going to be the sticky part. There seemed to be others leading off in places. But it's not so mixed up as the one in from the caves we watched. That would be a hopeless outfit to tackle. It's lucky you didn't try.' We had told him of our plan to get in there with the ladders.

'Perhaps Masalan knows of some other way round,' put in Valerie hopefully.

‘Rather doubtful, I should think. There’s certainly no other way as far as the bear-pit,’ I remarked.

‘Well, the only thing to do is to have her up and find out all we can. She may have some inkling as to what they’re going to do with Gobind, and what’s likely to happen now they’ve realised that there are more of us here.’ Frank shouted for Karima, who had just gone off somewhere. He had been talking to Masalan, interpreting at intervals to Taj Muhammad, who stood near. Lal Singh was still on guard on the staircase. Then Frank continued —

‘Tell you what: I’ve a jolly good mind to break down the bridge now that we’ve got another way in. That would mean not having to leave any one here on guard, and we could take our whole strength.’

I nodded. The same thought had occurred to me ever since I had left the three men at the pit. If we were going to go right into the mines, we wanted our whole party with us, except perhaps Taj Muhammad and the cook.

CHAPTER XV

WE BREAK THE BRIDGE

I LOOKED at my watch as we waited for Karima to come back. It was just one o'clock and the night was cloudless, with a glorious moon that looked as if she had come straight up from the waters of Gagribal, and, despite the situation, Browning's words about her came into my mind:

'Full she flared it, lamping Sanminiato,
Rounder 'twixt the cypresses and rounder,
Perfect, till the nightingales applauded . . .'

She's a friendly creature is the moon, and, like the ideal woman, the dream princess, there always seems to be something new about her each time you see her, some new delight hitherto only partly glimpsed. And, like the dream princess that I suppose every man dreams of at least once in his life, she is the perfect companion, who comes with you wherever you go.

Then suddenly the moon slipped from my thoughts as silence fell, and we all strained our ears to catch the sound below, Lal Singh's swift-flung challenge twice repeated, and then the crack of his rifle.

Frank and I, snatching up our rifles, were down the stairs in an instant to where the Sikh, crouching in the shadows, was raising his rifle for another shot.

'What is it? What are you firing at?'

He pressed the trigger again before he replied laconically —

'Men. There in the shadow at the end of the bridge. There!'

Suddenly Frank flung up his weapon, and the red flame stabbed the moonlight again as the shadows at the bridge-head suddenly woke into life, and a rush of a dozen men leapt across the little bridge.

Saunders, who had slipped down just behind me, let drive — the crack of his Mannlicher the first intimation of his presence — and then the four of us let them have it. Two of the little mob spun outwards into the dim silver gloom of the gulf, but the others were already across the bridge and on the stairway.

They swarmed up towards us, and Frank and Lal Singh turned upon them, the Sikh hurriedly reloading the double-express as he did so. Luckily, the rest of us had magazine weapons, and we caught them as they mounted the stairs. The cave men had evidently more courage than Saunders had originally given them credit for, but they wilted as the two leading men crumpled and slid over the edge, and another behind fell, clawing at the supports of the little bridge in the stairway itself.

They hung irresolute for an instant, and then, as the rifles spoke again and two more men went over, the remaining five fled down and back across the bridge, and I'm afraid we missed them all there, save perhaps the last figure, who flung forward behind a rock, apparently hard hit.

Then from the shadows on the farther side came loud yells and cries, shrieks, and hard-flung stones, and then the little pencil of red fire that marked Baz Khan's gun, followed by a spatter of lead on the stairway. Once or twice shifting shapes showed for an instant, to melt away again behind stones and rocks.

'Catch that stinker if you can,' shouted Saunders,

firing where he had last caught the flash of Baz Khan's weapon. But the Punjabi was wily, and each occasional shot came from a different point.

For half an hour we stayed there until the still silence that ensued made us think that they had given up the attempt, when another shower of stones revealed their presence. But they had no stomach to renew the attempt to cross the bridge, and seemed content to lie in wait there in case we might endeavour to cross.

'I suppose they think you crossed the bridge to get into the caves,' said Frank to me during a lull. 'It would be a topping chance to go back and rush the passage, now that Baz Khan's out here. But we should have to leave some one here to hold the bridge all the time, and in the caves we shall want every hand we can muster.'

'Break it,' said Saunders. 'Break it now, and then we shall have the darkness to cover us as we go to the falls. If we wait till daylight they'll see us. Besides, if Baz Khan's watching from the other side, it would be easier to get the job done now in the half light. Two of us with a couple of crowbars could push out the logs pretty quick, while the other two stand by in case they rush again or Baz Khan shows up. Lal Singh and I can push her over.'

It was undoubtedly the thing to do. There was plenty of cover on the other bank at short range, and we did not want to risk a single avoidable casualty. In daylight at that range Baz Khan could hardly miss, exposed as we would be on the bare rock face with the great drop below.

'Right-o! Slip along and fetch tools, while Jim and I get lower down where there's more shadow. We'd better get that other fellow out of the way. He's blocking the road.'

Saunders and the Sikh went back up the stairway for tools, and Frank and I moved downward to where the cave man lay by the little stair bridge. He was still alive, though rather far gone, with a bullet through his chest and no fight in him. We hadn't the heart to do the simplest thing, and just let him slip over the gulf. There wasn't much room on that stair, but we slid him downwards to the recess at the main bridge-head, and dumped him there to take his chance, while we covered the Sikh and Saunders, who had just returned with picks and crowbars.

They were in the shadow at the moment, but the moon's movement would presently throw them up in the light, and then Baz Khan would probably begin giving trouble. Still there was about ten minutes more darkness to work in. They had brought the hand-axe as well, and while they were levering at the hold-fasts, I cut every rope I could reach, ready to spring back to my rifle at the least sign of movement across the bridge.

The shadows shortened towards us while we worked as noiselessly as we could, levering the great tree trunk sideways towards the edge of the platform. We had got the first one freed and nearly half-way to the edge when the moonlight fell on us for the first time, and there were yells from the other side. Probably they had been listening to the noises we were making, and wondering what was up. Another minute and the light showed us up fully, and jumping back to my rifle I crouched ready. They might rush again.

There were more cries now out of the gloom ahead and stones, and then suddenly the flash of Baz Khan's gun and a lethal bullet flicked past my head and crumpled on the rock behind. Almost at the

same moment I heard the crack of Frank's rifle. He had been waiting for that tell-tale flash, but Baz Khan was back and under cover again already.

The tree-trunk was very near the edge by now, but there was no more shadow to hide us. They could hardly rush across now with the super-structure of the bridge gaping in the middle where the two logs were slipping apart, and I got up to give a hand. Then as we strained at the crowbar there was another report from the opposite bank, followed by a spatter of buckshot about us, and I heard Lal Singh grunt. Then he bent to the pick-axe again, and the next moment the end of the great pine ground its slow way over the edge, hanging an instant ere it slipped, dragging the other from its fastenings, and the two fell downwards towards the hidden torrent below.

Their fall was greeted by a wild yell from the concealed men opposite, another shower of stones, and a shot from Baz Khan, which, passing just between Saunders and the Sikh, found its home with a dull thud in the unfortunate cave man's body. Then silence succeeded, and a couple of swiftly moving shadows was the last we saw of the party opposite. We waited there a while, but nothing further materialised, so leaving Lal Singh still on guard — even with the bridge gone we didn't like to leave the stairs unguarded at night — we climbed back to the top of the rock, where Valerie was waiting for us, her face rather drawn in the moonlight, with Dog Bill crouching by her side. He hates guns, and generally bolts when he hears them, but to-night there was nowhere to bolt to.

'I fancy Mr. Baz Khan thinks we crossed the bridge to get in there,' said Frank. 'He's now prob-

ably under the impression that he's got the party in the cave cold meat, and will probably go back and try and round them up if he can. It's up to us to get along there as quick as we can and lend a hand.'

'I don't fancy he'll attack them, though. He'll probably try to starve them out. With luck we might be able to make a real surprise attack if we hurry,' replied Saunders. 'I suggest that we find out what we can from Masalan and then push along.'

'The first thing to know is what exactly they're likely to be doing with Gobind,' I remarked.

We had up Masalan then, and with Karima's aid questioned her about the habits of the people inside with regard to any prisoners. Naturally prisoners were a far from common occurrence: herself, Baz Khan and his friend, one small Gujar child who had died, and ourselves were all she could remember. But she thought that they would be sure to kill him. They had been talking of that before we rescued Saunders.

They would probably do so that night, as it was the full moon, which was always a great occasion with them. On that night they usually assembled in the big hall where the idol was, and sacrificed a goat, after which there was a feast, followed by dancing and drinking from rough spirit which they made. To-night the usual programme would have been followed, only Baz Khan had chosen it for the occasion to hand over one prisoner to the bear. Now having been disappointed in that, it was very likely that they would go back and make up for it by disposing of Gobind.

'We haven't got much time to lose in that case,' said Frank. 'We'd better get along now and rush that passage. I wonder if she could find another way

in. You said there were lots of side-arms, long 'un?'

'I saw several of them as I was brought along.'

Masalan explained then that after crossing the pit where the bear had been we should find a long passage with cross-shafts, several of which might serve our turn. We might, if we could only get rid of the men who were sure to be watching, get into the big hall quite unseen. It was a high place, with passages opening off at different levels, and we might find one unoccupied, as probably all the people would be collected there.

'Well, we'll go along now,' said Frank decisively, rising to his feet. 'Now that the bridge has gone, this place will be safe enough, and we can all three go.'

'All four,' announced Valerie firmly. 'I'm not stopping here by myself with the cook and Taj Muhammad, even if the bridge *is* gone.'

'Much better stop here, old girl,' said her brother. 'We don't know quite what's going to happen inside. It may be very unpleasant.'

'And that's just the reason why I'm coming.'

And for the first time in her life she stood up to her brother in a way that there was no gainsaying.

It was clear that Frank was hesitating and thinking it over. It was a difficult choice, but still, if things went crooked, at least she would be with us, whereas if she was left behind and we came to grief, what was to prevent Baz Khan and his friends finding the way behind the falls and so coming to the fort rock?

So she got permission to come, and I honestly think that just one little factor in the case was that this time Frank knew that whatever was said she would come.

We had a hurried meal, packed up some food for

the men in the caves, and then paraded and armed our party. Frank, Saunders, and I had our magazine rifles, while Lal Singh had Frank's double-express. Karima was fitted out with Frank's shot-gun. We took one coolie along with us to carry the food for the men, and water-bottles and thermos-flasks. Then, leaving Taj Muhammad in charge of the fort with instructions to wait there two days, and if we didn't appear again to make tracks for the nearest point in which he could find troops — many days' march it was — and report the whole thing, we set out down the stairs, past the dead cave man, a tumbled heap in the recess where the bridge had been. By the silence on the opposite bank, it seemed that the cave people, thinking we could no longer get at them, had gone home.

We took Masalan with us naturally, but I don't think she would have stopped behind, anyway. She seemed to have taken a fancy to Valerie, and kept on following her with her eyes whenever she moved. We passed the little ruined settlement with the ghostly remains of the houses, moving in single file along the edge of the great canyon, a black gash in the ground, all silvered now in the moonlight. Frank and Saunders led the way, followed by the men, while Valerie and I brought up the rear. Dog Bill, to his great annoyance, had been left in charge of Taj Muhammad, a thing he dislikes.

It was a weird change to our previous expeditions, this silent moonlit trek along the plain, which looked even more desolate than usual, rather like the pictures one sees of lunar landscapes with the furrowed soil, the dark gashes of nullahs and canyons, and high above us the great mass of the snows.

But we all felt a great deal more cheerful than we

had any time during the last forty-eight hours. We had got back two of our party unhurt, and we had twice had the best of the cave people, who, in fact, except for Baz Khan, did not seem very dangerous. But, of course, we were now going to face them in their own country, and in a tortuous network of dark passages such as Saunders and Gulab had described, the value of our weapons would be considerably discounted.

'Do you think we'll get poor Gobind out all right?' said Valerie to me once as we went along. 'I should just hate anything to happen to him. After all, it's our fault that he's got caught by these hateful fiends.'

'We'll get him out surely, person. Our luck's holding marvelously well so far. The Weston family is generally lucky. Look at the weather we've had as a small example.'

'Yes. We're lucky enough in the small things. I'm not so sure about the big ones always, though.' And with that she relapsed into silence.

'Mind you stick close to me, anyway, whatever happens, Valerie. Frank and Saunders will be busy running the show, so I'm looking after you.'

'I'll stick close enough to you, Jim; don't you worry.'

Then on we went in silence again until we reached the great falls. But we had brought a hurricane lantern this time, and with its light the passage was not so difficult as it had been when I brought Saunders back. After that we moved more carefully, with Lal Singh out a few yards on the one flank and Karima on the other. Masalan had told us that there was no way from the plain to the depression we were now in, but we were taking no risks.

‘It’s a beastly looking place,’ commented Valerie, as we reached the cave mouth; and certainly, seen for the first time in the moonlight, it was not reassuring. With its masses of black shadows from the scattered boulders around, the gaping dark mouth of the cave, the quaint-shaped peaks above us outlined against the sky, and higher up the gleaming sheen of ice, the whole place might very easily have served for a setting for some old German elf story.

Then into the dark passage, and so eventually to the red glow of Masalan’s cave, where to our astonishment we found Rassula sitting by the fire, and opposite to him — hands lashed together with coarse grass rope — squatted a wrinkled-faced old crone of the caves. She cowered down as we entered, and then catching sight of Masalan, hailed her with a torrent of words.

‘Who is she, Rassula, and where did you get her?’ queried Frank.

‘She came to the other side of the pit, sahibs,’ said the shikari, as he loosened her hands now that we had come. He addressed himself to me as one who knew the locality. ‘We had been there some time, and there was no firing. I think Baz Khan must have slipped away. Then we saw a light coming up the passage, and Gulab wanted to fire, but Fateh Khan and I restrained him, being desirous of seeing who it might be. With the pit between us none could do any harm, and we wished to know who was there. Also we thought that perchance the cave people, being frightened, might have prevailed upon Baz Khan to release Gobind. Then as the light came nearer we saw that it was this. She came to the edge of the pit and called out in her language, which is much like Balti. She was calling to Masalan. So I

answered, and bade her come to the corner. Then, telling the sepoy to be ready to shoot quick if any others might appear, I slipped the plank across, and told her to come to our side. This she did, and I speedily withdrew the plank.

‘It seems that she is one of the women who live with Masalan, and she came to bring her news. Fearing a trap, we bound her hands, and I brought her here, leaving the other two on guard, since we had but two guns.’ This last rather reproachfully, I think, since I had taken my shot-gun from him and given it to Gulab when Saunders had taken his own Mannlicher Schœneur from the ex-havildar.

‘We have brought you another now, Rassula; you can take Karima’s, since you are the better shot.’

‘When she was captured she was frightened at first, and would say naught. But by degrees I prevailed upon her to speak, and she said that they are even now getting ready to kill Gobind. Also that Baz Khan is very angry with Masalan, and says that he will presently kill her also, since it must be by her aid that we found another entrance and overcame the bear. And being afraid lest meanwhile he might kill her also, since he knows her to be one of Masalan’s women, this old woman hid herself, and then came by another passage to the pit, having avoided those on guard at the end. They are some way from the pit, she says, being afraid of the noises of the guns which kill. She also said that she thought Baz Khan had gone out with men seeking us.’

‘Yes. He came out all right, Rassula; but he was unwise, since Lal Singh saw his men, and we dealt with them upon the bridge, killing several, after which the rest fled. Baz Khan, however, escaped.

Then we broke down the bridge, so as to leave no sentries there, and all came hither.'

'It is good, sahib; and now we will go and rescue the Sikh.' He had already possessed himself of Karima's gun, much to his nephew's annoyance, and was counting the cartridges before putting them into his pocket.

'Well, now you'd better talk to Masalan and see if the woman has told her anything more than she told you.'

He turned to Masalan, and for the next few minutes they were busily engaged in conversation, the aged crone intervening at intervals with shrill remarks, while the rest of us listened in that intensely annoying condition of not being able to pick up the meaning of a single word.

'Why the devil didn't I learn Balti?' complained Saunders. 'Damn sight more useful than the putrid Greek they tried to rub into me at school!'

CHAPTER XVI

VALERIE FIRES MY BROWNING

MASALAN's version of the news the old woman had brought, when Rassula had translated it, amounted to a very distinct corroboration of what she had told us would be the probable state of affairs. After the cave people had recovered from their first alarm at the slaying of the bear, Baz Khan had told them that he would presently put everything right, and with his most trusted followers had gone out to attack the fort rock, being convinced that our rescue party had crossed the bridge. His people had observed it from the first, but, thinking that with the capture of Saunders and his party they had disposed of all the intruders, had not worried about it any further for the moment.

On his unsuccessful return something like a mutiny had followed. The cave people were divided as to whether they should follow his lead or join with Masalan. Finally, the influence of the old man whom Saunders had seen, who apparently was their hereditary priest, had carried the day. The old man — a bloodthirsty scoundrel he seemed — had told them that unless swift action was taken to pacify the gods, now greatly incensed by the death of their vehicle, the bear, certain vengeance would fall upon the cave people, and they would all be utterly destroyed.

The first thing to do, therefore, was to appease the gods, and soothe them by the most pleasing means, the scent of blood of one of the intruders, who was

fortunately in their hands. Thereafter the gods, being pleased, would assist them to destroy the remainder. In fact, the whole trouble was that they had not killed Saunders and his party the first night, but listened to the words of Masalan. This foolishness on their part in depriving the gods of their just dues had incensed the deities, who had consequently withheld their help, and allowed disaster to fall upon the cave-dwellers, so that the sacred bear had been slain and several men had perished.

Apparently Masalan and the old priest had already had words upon occasion, and there was no doubt that considerable jealousy existed between them.

The priest's words had eventually had their effect, and the cave people had decided to offer up Gobind to the gods by the hand of the priest, after which they trusted that the gods in return would deliver them from the white noise devils who had so suddenly and mysteriously appeared. The sacrifice, which would be accompanied by the usual ceremonies, would take place at the first moment of dawn, and they were even now making ready for it.

Baz Khan had placed such men as he could trust to watch the main passage from the pit to the great hall, and rough stone shoots were arranged, so that if any one attempted to penetrate there from our side they would be crushed to death. One imagines that Baz Khan thought that the bulk of our party were now safely on the far side of the great ravine, and that all he had to deal with were the two or three men who had remained on guard after killing the bear.

'Then how the devil are we to get into the place?' questioned Saunders. 'We don't stand much chance

wandering along a pitch-black hole waiting for the blighters at the other end to pull the string and let the roof down on our heads. And we've got to do something, and do it quick.'

'What about the side passages?' asked Frank. He turned to Rassula. 'Ask her if they're guarding the side passages as well. Also ask her how the old woman got here without their seeing her.'

'I asked her that. It seems, sahib, that there is one very narrow little tunnel above the others which they have forgotten, or perhaps do not know of, since it is not much used. By that, going very quietly, we might come out again into the main passage behind the guard, and so deal with them. But it must be done without noise, since otherwise the people inside will hear, and then Gobind will doubtless be killed before we get there, since even if the cave people are alarmed and flee, Baz Khan — who is surely mad like a jackal — will slay him. The priest also is mad, she says — mad with an evil madness.'

'Where is the passage, and how many men are there on guard? Are they all together?'

'There were but four when the old woman came, and she passed above them. They are the strongest and bravest men there, but they are not too well content, being afraid lest they also be slain by the "noises," as they call the guns. Therefore they all keep together in one place round a corner, since Baz Khan has told them that so they will be safe from the guns. But if they hear any one coming they are to give the alarm, and loose the stone shoots.'

'We shall have to tackle them quietly somehow, that's clear,' said Frank thoughtfully. 'Wish I had a bayonet! Still, my big clasp-knife will do for one.'

Gulab's got his axe, which makes two. What about you, Saunders?'

'Baz Khan's got my shikar knife. But I know a trick or two, and if I can only get my fingers on one of the swine, I'll guarantee his keeping pretty quiet.'

'Well, Lal Singh will have to tackle the fourth. He used to be a bit of a wrestler.' He explained the business to the Sikh. Then he turned to me.

'You must follow us with the rest of the party, Jim, and be ready to come in if wanted. But don't shoot unless you're driven to it.'

Thereupon we set out for the pit, where we found Fateh Khan and Gulab in position watching the opposite side. They had neither seen nor heard anything since the arrival of the old woman, and they had had the sense to keep quiet themselves, for which we were thankful. Gulab seemed to be saner and quiet, which was a relief. After his excitement at the pit and the sight of his cousin, I was afraid he might be a bit out of hand.

'Lal Singh and I will cross first,' said Frank, 'and as soon as we're in the passage opposite, Saunders and Gulab follow. The rest of you cover us in case we're rushed on the way. When we're over and holding the passage, then you can come along.'

He moved off with the Sikh towards the ledge which I had pointed out to him, and by the light of the torch slid the plank into place and crossed. The rest of us waited for the sound of a scuffle, or even for the report of a gun, but no untoward noise came to our ears, and in a minute or two we caught Frank's low whistle calling Saunders and Gulab to follow him. When they were across and nothing had occurred, the rest of us followed, Fateh Khan being

left — much to his annoyance — with the coolie to guard the passage across the pit.

As we crossed the ledge I pointed out the dead bodies of the bear and the steel-capped man to Valerie, half-seen black masses on the floor of the pit among the white bones. We were both of us glad to be across the narrow ledge and the rickety plank, and to feel the more solid ground under our feet again as we came into the tunnel, and found the others waiting for us with Rassula, Karima, and Masalan, who had crossed before us.

‘Where now?’ queried Saunders, looking about him by the faint light of the torch. We had left the lamp with Fateh Khan, as there was no means of blinding it.

Frank, who had been talking to Masalan by the aid of Rassula, pointed ahead.

‘Just a little way on and then we have to climb the side of a cave, which leads us out into an upper passage. I gather we have to grovel a bit there. For the Lord’s sake, keep quiet! The torch has got to go out now, although they’re some way ahead yet, so every one hold on to the man in front.’

We went forward again into the inky darkness, treading softly and slowly one behind the other until those in front checked, and we halted. I could see no glimmer of light in any direction, and, moreover, there seemed to be no sound ahead. The passage was narrow, but fairly high, and the floor seemed to the feel to be covered with dust, although the walls were smooth well-polished rock.

‘We climb here,’ came Frank’s whisper out of the dark. ‘Masalan’s leading, and I’m hanging on to her. We’re all right so far. I’ve been feeling the walls both sides, and we’ve passed no passages.’

I heard sounds of scrambling ahead, and presently Lal Singh, who was standing in front of me, moved on a couple of paces and halted again. That happened four times, and then he slipped up in front of me, and I realised that he was being helped up the side of the tunnel. Next moment he was above me, and I felt him reach down his hands in the darkness to help me up, so I pushed Valerie forward, and she was dragged up the rock. Then my turn came, and I found myself again on level ground, where just in front the least little glimmer of the torch, half muffled in Frank's handkerchief, showed that we were in a smaller passage, narrower, and not so high.

'Keep your hands on the walls, every one, and look out for side passages,' came back the word, and then we were off again in single file in the darkness. Presently it seemed to me that there was a faint reddish light ahead which grew slightly, until suddenly we halted, and I caught the faintest sound of whispering. Then against the dim glow in front I saw Frank's burly figure making back towards us.

'That you, Jim?' he whispered as he reached us. Then recognising me: 'We kick off here. The guard is just below, and there's a side opening where we drop behind them. We four are going down and going to jump 'em from behind. As soon as we've disposed of them I'll give the signal, and you all come down.'

He went forward again, and presently I could make out that he and the leading figures had disappeared. There seemed more red glow in front now, though still far off, and there were faint sounds. Just in front of us stood Rassula holding on to Masalan, whom even now he didn't trust overmuch.

The sounds in front grew louder and louder, till

they seemed to fill the whole passage, distant chanting, mingled with the low beat of drums or metal instruments of sorts like gongs, and occasionally wild shrieks and yells. The noises grew in intensity until the whole passage seemed to vibrate with them. In one way the din — presumably the cave people ahead working themselves up into a frenzy for the great sacrifice due in another hour — it was just after five, and the sun should be up shortly after six — was a great advantage in drowning any noise we made.

I leaned forward, trying to catch the least sound of a scuffle below me. My eyes, now more accustomed to the darkness, could just make out the dark gap a little farther along on our right, down which presumably Frank and his party had vanished, and I whispered back to Valerie, standing behind me, to listen, since she has keener ears than I.

Then suddenly out of the darkness on my right something sprang at me, and I was aware of eyes luminous in the dark like a jackal's, and arms like wire cables about me as I fell to the ground. The thing had long hair, and it smelt as foul as any caged beast as we struggled there in the dim light. I had one arm twisted under me and the other bound to my side by the thing's grip, and then I realised that its other hand was feeling for my throat, while between the white sharp teeth, which I could just make out an inch or two from my face, was the sheen of steel.

I freed my right arm from under me, and tried to heave the man up as I struggled to get at my revolver-hilt, and then as suddenly as he had seized me he let go with his right hand, while his left closed about my throat, and I caught the quick gleam as the knife was snatched from his teeth and went up to strike.

I knew rather than saw that Rassula had let Masalan go, and was springing in, knew too that he would be too late as I pathetically cursed my revolver for getting under me as we fell.

Then a red flash in the darkness, simultaneous with a crash and a thud, and the man fell over me again, while wet soft warmth spattered over my face. I kicked myself free of the twitching mass, and got to my feet as Rassula pulled the body clear.

'It was only an inch, Jim; not even a yard! You *are* all right, aren't you?' said a voice that didn't know whether it was crying or laughing, and Valerie, shaking even more than the twitching corpse on the floor, caught my hand with her free one, the other still holding my little Browning.

'Very much all right, person, thanks,' said I in a voice probably equally shaky as I fumbled for a handkerchief to wipe my face.

'Oh! is he dead? It was a *man*, wasn't it?' Such a trembling little voice now.

'He's dead enough, person.' Rassula had pushed the body to one side of the passage, where it lay a dark shadow in the gloom. Considering I was trying to wipe the man's brains off my clothes, there wasn't much question, but I had the sense not to mention that detail to Valerie. 'Keep your barrel down and push the safety-catch up again. I wonder if they heard that? I hope the noise in front drowned it!'

Then we saw the profile of a man appearing from the side entrance in front, and Frank climbed back into the passage.

'What's up?' he whispered. 'What are you firing at?'

'Fellow who rushed me with a knife. Luckily, Valerie got him in time. But I'm afraid it's given

the game away. The men below must have heard it, though probably the people in front won't, as they're making such a row.'

'If they haven't heard it, no one else has. Luckily, we'd just settled with the sentries.' I couldn't see his face properly in the gloom, but his voice sounded rather grim.

'All four?' We hadn't heard a sound!

'Three. There weren't four. Perhaps yours was the fourth. Where is he?'

I indicated the remains by the wall.

'Wonder how he got there?' said Frank, feeling about the side of the narrow passage. 'Oh, here we are? Wonder I didn't spot that on the way along.' It was the mouth of a little side passage on the right, short of the other one, and just behind where I had been standing. The fellow must have come up from below for some reason and bumped into us, and perhaps in frenzy of fear jumped at the nearest man, which happened to be me.

'Well, come along down below quick now, and we'll get on.'

We followed him down into the main passage again, where we found Saunders, Gulab, and Lal Singh. The Punjabi, his gun leaning against the wall, was cleaning the edge of his axe with a piece of dirty cloth. We could risk the torch again now, being round a corner, and the guard out of action, so to speak.

'What did you do?' I asked, while Rassula and Masalan were scrambling down.

'Stalked 'em, quiet like. They were sitting in a lump with their backs towards us, with a little fire. I don't think they heard us with that row going on in front. We all went in together. Gulab caught

No. 1 with his axe, and the fellow simply tumbled forward and never moved. Saunders and Lal Singh jumped the other two, and kept them quiet, while I had to slip round and do the dirty with my knife. Messy show, but there was nothing else for it.'

'And now we go straight ahead, I take it?'

'We must make Masalan lead us to some point where we can get a bead on them without being seen. I think the tip is a burst of rapid to make them bolt to cover. If we get Baz Khan, the rest'll chuck it, I fancy.'

'Feeling all right, person?' I said to Valerie, as Frank was marshalling the party again.

'Of course I am, Jim!' The voice was really quite indignant. 'I hope he died at once, though.' Less indignation and more tenderness now, the woman's natural dislike to taking life even when necessary to protect dearer life. But she was still shaking, I could see that. She always does when really indignant about any one trying to do down her friends. Very quiet voiced and slightly tremulous, and her voice goes down a tone instead of up.

I kept Gulab back with me this time in case we had another scrimmage in the dark, so that Valerie was sandwiched between us. The fellow might just as easily have jumped at her, and I didn't like to think of that, even though I was there and my Smith and Wesson handy.

On we went through the long passage, the red glow and the noise in front getting more and more pronounced as we turned into a dead straight piece. Then Masalan checked us, and we turned off into a side passage, where once again we were in darkness, although the noise of the people in front was still audible.

Along a short tunnel with branch passages, through a couple of small caves that reeked of stale humanity, up some rough-cut stairs, and then out on to a narrow ledge, where the red glow enabled us to see each other clearly, although the noise, now below us, made speech difficult.

But we didn't all come out at once. The party checked on the stairs, and then Lal Singh, in front of me, whispered that Frank was reconnoitring. Presently we moved on again, a step at a time, each one vanishing as he reached the top of the stairs, until the opening in front was clear, save for Frank squeezing himself against the side as he told me to turn sharp left and keep well down under cover.

With Valerie close behind me, I swung to my left, and realised the need to keep down. We were on the edge of a great high cave, the opposite wall of which seemed to be eighty or a hundred feet away at the very least. From the noise below it was clear that the cave people were gathered in large numbers and with big fires going, since the wall opposite showed red, and distorted shadows played about it.

Above us the cave shot high into the rock, perhaps seventy or eighty feet up, and in the dancing fire-light it was difficult to be sure whether even there it really ended or not. We moved in the shadow, of course, on a wide ledge, seven or eight feet across, slanting upwards towards the edge, which was uneven with rough knobs and projections of rock, and along this crouched such of our party as had preceded us.

Saunders, in the centre, signed to me to get away to his left, where the ledge ended in the high straight wall of rock some twenty feet from him. It was a safe corner, with no other entry, and having en-

sconced Valerie there and told her to keep down for the moment, I slipped back to Saunders to ask what the scheme was.

He was curled up under the lee of one of the knobs of rock, his rifle by his side, the red glow playing about his bony face.

'We wait now till Gobind appears. Neither he nor Baz Khan are here yet, and I can't see my pleasant clerical friend either. If you edge up very quiet and keep low, you can get a squint over from this bump. First night for "Back to Methuselah" viewed from the upper circle! If only we had a movie camera here, we'd be made for life.'

CHAPTER XVII

THE HALL OF SACRIFICE

I SLIPPED forward the few inches to the edge of the rock, and with infinite caution lifted my head in the cover of the round stone knob behind which Saunders was crouching and looked over, the shadow of the rock screening us from the gaze of those below should any of them happen to look up.

It was 'Back to Methuselah' with a vengeance. The ledge on which we lay hung some fifty feet above the floor of the great cave, which, natural in the first instance, had been worked upon considerably by the hand of man. The walls around were cut out into rough niches, each with its little rock platform, like the cells round a Buddhist temple.

At one end of the cave — the one to our left — was a colossal rough-hewn figure of a demon, or demi-god — probably a representation of one of the kings of the regions into which the Buddhists of the Himalayas divide the universe. All about him were little sculptured figures of minor beings on horse and on foot, carved in the rock, from which the main figure was very nearly detached. He was large and gross, slant-eyed and clean-shaven, but eminently warlike, and there was a certain trace of Chinese influence in his portrayal, in the scale armour which he wore, in the banners carried by his following.

The whole cave was one red glow from the leaping smoky flames of many fires in the niches around — fires that from our point of vantage appeared to be similar to the one in Masalan's cave, oil-fed. The

flames flickered on the rock carvings, lit up the dark little cells around, and fell upon the crowd of men and women standing and squatting about the uneven floor.

They were the roughest-looking crew one could imagine. Some were clothed in coarse blankets flung over their shoulders, others wore crude garments of goatskin, others again had but little in the way of dress save tattered kilts of dubious coloured cloth. Men and women alike wore their long hair drooping on their shoulders in tangled black masses, but the majority of the men were strangely devoid of hair on their faces.

Footgear for the most part they had none; here and there were one or two wearing the rough twisted grass sandal, while one stalwart fellow sported a pair of chaplis, which I think had belonged to Gobind or Gulab. Most of them had amulets of sorts, either round their necks or stitched to the coarse grey blankets, sometimes what seemed to be the red stones worn by Masalan, sometimes odd-shaped pieces of wool or metal.

Of weapons they seemed to possess but few, crudely made knives, generally slung by cords from their throats, a few spears, an old sword or two. In a corner lay a heap of digging implements, mattocks, and the like, hoes, and what looked like crowbars.

The space in front of the statue was clear for some feet, where a small platform, somewhat higher than the rest of the cave floor, ran out from the base of the carving, and on either side of this were two passages running into the rock wall. Grouped to one side were some half a dozen men, younger looking than the majority, and with rather effeminate faces, who hammered upon crude drums of skin stretched over

metal bowls, while behind them some women intoned the weird chanting we had heard from the passage. At intervals the crowd around would take up the noises — one could not call them music — and the whole mob would rise, chanting in unison and beating the floor with their feet.

There were between eighty and a hundred of them — men and women — and as I looked another half-dozen entered the cave from the opposite side bearing large earthenware vessels, which they set down on the platform. Their appearance was the signal for a renewed outburst of noise, and then the mob settled round the platform, squatting in a packed circle on the floor, and a youngish man stepped up on to it with a rough reed flute in his hand.

His appearance was the signal for silence, and when the noise had ceased, he turned to the statue behind him and bowed three times, lower and lower, until at the last his forehead touched the rock floor. Then, leaping to his feet, he brushed his long hair off his face, put the flute to his lips, and broke into a weird shrill tune that reminded me in some ways of the airs that the Hill Baluch plays.

It was a haunting air with a distinct tune in it, which is not always the case with oriental music, and a remarkable dancing lilt; and as the music quickened, the drums, which had at first been silent, took up the tune — at first softly, then louder and louder, like thunder coming over distant hills. The men and women squatting before him began to sway from side to side in time to the music, chanting softly the while in some unknown tongue. Then first one and then another got to their feet and broke into a rhythmic dance, each dancing alone, with individual gestures whose meaning was beyond us.

By degrees the whole cave seemed to fill with dancing figures, and now the music grew louder and the chanting shriller and the dancers wilder in their movements, casting off any encumbering wraps, half-nude figures in the red glow of the great fires, calling to one another with loud cries as they moved and twisted from side to side, weaving their way in and out without any very definite pattern and yet with some strange symmetry.

Then suddenly the music hushed again, and the whole swaying dancing mob stopped, and turned with one accord towards the statue, and as the flute gave a last shrill sob and the drums a last soft dying tremor, men and women all, they sank on the knees and bowed their heads to the floor. Silence fell — an uncanny silence — with the echoes of the music, and the shouts still dying away in the high vaulted roof of the cave as an old and wizened man stepped out from behind the statue to stand upon the platform with upraised outstretched arms.

‘My good old clerical pal,’ whispered Saunders. ‘The curtain’s probably going up now. Keep well down, Miss Weston.’

I turned to find Valerie crawling up to us, evidently tired of seeing nothing from her corner. She edged up beside me, and I caught her low little gasp of astonishment at the sight that met her eyes as she looked over.

As Saunders had said, the man’s costume consisted of nothing save the red stones, his long, dirty, yellow-white hair, and a knife roped about his middle. He was very old, and his bones stuck out everywhere, gaunt ribs and knotted joints, protruding cheek bones, and great hollow eye-sockets, which housed eyes that were strangely alive in that skull-

like face — eyes that seemed to have the same dull smouldering red glow as the great stones upon his bony chest.

When the crowd was silent he turned to the statue and bowed as the flute-man had done, then rose to his feet and turned again to the crowd, speaking in low slow tones. He seemed to have some strange power over them, for never a sound came from the mob as he spoke, and not one of them rose from their crouching positions; only it seemed to us that from time to time as his voice rose and fell they shivered. Perhaps he was telling them of the punishments the gods had in store for those who thwarted their wishes.

Then suddenly his arm shot out, and the long skinny forefinger pointed straight at a youngish woman in the centre of the crowd, and those about her moved away to either side. As if mesmerised she rose to her feet, walked slowly and stiffly towards him, stepped upon the platform, and stayed still, arms hanging limply at her sides. He laid his hand upon her neck and drew her a step closer, lifted her chin, and stared into her face, and again we heard the quick intake of breath from the watching crowd.

Then as if satisfied he waved his hand before her eyes, and mechanically and like an automaton she raised her hands cup-wise before her breast. Another man younger than the priest, or whatever he was, stepped out from behind the statue, carrying a curious old brass bowl, which at a sign from his master he placed in the woman's hands. Her fingers closed about it, and then, as though obeying some secret command, she turned and faced the crowd with unseeing eyes, the brass bowl held close to her bosom, her slim figure quaintly statuesque in its

rigidity, even the folds of her short ragged kilt seeming moulded from something hard.

Then the priest spoke to the man who had brought the bowl, and he turned and went out behind the statue, while the priest spoke again to the crowd, and pointed up to the gloom above the statue, where there seemed to be a fault in the rock, a narrow crevice that the firelight could not penetrate.

I lost the next bit after that because Frank came up, and, pulling me and Saunders down, explained that Masalan, who was watching from the other end, said that the time was drawing on, and that very shortly they would produce Gobind. Valerie told me afterwards that the old man made some more mystic gestures, and that two men bearing a large metal dish had come on to the platform opposite to the young woman with the bowl.

‘What are we to do?’ asked Saunders.

‘As soon as they bring in Gobind, Masalan says that the crowd will do another dance, after which they separate into two parties — men one side, women the other — leaving a clear passage down the cave, through which he will be marched. But before that they take a little blood from his arm and offer it to the god in the bowl the woman’s holding, to see if the victim is acceptable. Some sign or other will be given to show that he is, after which they bring him down to the far end of the cave and prepare him for the show. That’s where we chip in. There will be four men leading him, and we’ve got to get them first go-off, and shout to Gobind to jump our way. I’ll give the word. You two and Rassula have got to make sure of the guards while Gulab and I look after Baz Khan.’

‘But what if they’ve got him trussed up?’ I tried

to imagine how the unfortunate Gobind could get to us even if we did knock out the men holding him.

'He won't be. It's part of the programme for him to walk. They'll have his hands tied, that's all. The entrance to the main passage is just below us, and the instant we've pushed over Baz Khan, Gulab and I scuttle down to pick up Gobind. The rest of you chivvy the crowd, who will probably bolt off to the other side.'

'And then what happens?'

'Depends how things go. We can either retire in good order back to the pit, or we can have a look around if they're not showing fight. Personally I think once Baz Khan is flattened out, the rest won't show any kind of fight at all.'

'Wouldn't it be better to chip in the moment they produce him, and not wait for any preliminaries?' I objected. I didn't like the idea of the blood-sampling process.

'If we do, there's every chance of Gobind's being scuppered or swept off in the rush; and we should have the crush between him and us,' said Frank.

'We don't want to get mixed up with the mob until we've laid out a few and scared them,' put in Saunders. 'I think Weston's right. They're just like animals in a pack. Our best chance to get him out unhurt is to wait until he's close to cover.'

'And if they don't bolt?'

'Then we've got to make the best of our way back along the passage, you, Valerie, and Rassula to lead with Gobind, while the rest of us cover the retreat as far as the pit. We'll be safe enough then.'

I hoped very sincerely they would bolt. I had no desire for a hand-to-hand scrimmage in those tun-

nels with Valerie to look after moreover, and possibly a very weak Gobind to haul along. For all we knew, he might be in no condition to put up a fight, might even have to be carried. Certainly the cave people had bolted quick enough the last time, but one never knew, and just now they were being worked up by the fanatical-looking fiend on the platform. While we were talking, the chanting and the drums and the occasional yells had recommenced.

Having settled the details, we got back into our positions again, and I found a place where Valerie and I could see from almost as well as we had seen from Saunders's perch. As Valerie had said, there were now four of them on the platform: the old man; the woman, still in exactly the same statuesque pose; and the two men kneeling with the brass dish. The crowd were still squatting on the floor, but no longer in silence, while the drums were beating furiously, and from time to time the shrill notes of the flute added to the noise.

Then a new silence fell as from the passage on the right of the statue Baz Khan emerged, followed by two men. I rejoiced very greatly to see a blood-stained rag bound about his throat. Evidently one at least of our shots had not been so very wide of the mark, and his neck was clearly stiff and painful by the slow way he turned his head to look at the assembled crowd.

He seemed out of place in his more or less European garments — Saunders's I suppose I should say — among that mob of half-clothed savages; but a glance at his eyes and face showed that he was really in his proper place. There was a wolfish look about his features, and his eyes had the strange fixed glare of madness, while the sensual mouth seemed thirsty

and eager. I was very anxious to see him go over with a good honest bullet in his brain.

For the first time the priest lost something of his dominance as Baz Khan spoke to him, and it was clear that the fanatic had found his master. Probably Baz Khan only gave him as much rope as would serve his own purpose. It was clear enough that every man there was afraid of the Punjabi, and it speaks a great deal for the man that from a captive there he had, merely by his wits and the strength of his arm, won his way to power. Now, with Saunders's gun in his hand and the new power of quick killing it gave him, his position was even more assured.

The crowd was very quiet as Baz Khan spoke, and only when he made a sign to the man behind him did the shouts and yells break out again. The man stepped back into the darkness of the passage, and a moment later, preceded by two men bearing torches, four men surrounding a fifth stepped forth and on to the platform.

The fifth was Gobind, his long hair, usually so carefully knotted up under his *pag*, loose about his shoulders, his beard — generally neatly twisted up on a string — streaming over his muscular throat and chest. They had taken nearly all his clothes, leaving him only the little short drawers, which, with the long hair, the steel bangle, which still glinted on his right wrist, and the kirpan, which, of course, had been taken from him, are the marks of the true Sikh. But they had replaced the missing articles with two great ropes of the red stones hung about his neck. Evidently the victim was to be adorned meetly for the pleasure of the gods.

His hands were loosely bound, and, as in Saun-

ders's case, a rope was about his throat — a rope with four ends, one held by each of the men, so that whichever direction he might try to move, there would always be a man to pull him backwards. He looked all right, though gaunt and haggard, and so far they had evidently done him no particular harm.

They led him to the edge of the platform and showed him to the mob of people crouching there, while the drums played softly and the flute player broke into a joyous shrill chant on his instrument. Then the priest turned to the statue, and after bowing low three times, turned again to the Sikh, and this time his knife was bare in his bony hand. The two men with Baz Khan caught Gobind's arms from behind and thrust him closer to the woman with the bowl, who never even moved an eyelid. She seemed in a trance, until at a look from the priest she slowly stretched out her arms and held the bowl close to the prisoner.

It was very hard not to shoot then, but we had to trust to Masalan, who seemed to know what she was talking about, and so far had helped us faithfully. Gobind evidently thought that his time had come, and one could see him draw himself up to meet the knife, but held and pinioned as he was, a fight was out of the question. But the priest made only the smallest cut on his arm, and a tiny trickle of blood flowed down into the bowl. Valerie slipped down from where she was lying, and I heard her breathing fast as she sat up below me.

Taking the bowl from the woman's hands the priest turned to the statue, and the crowd were silent. He lifted the bowl, and held it out to the grim demon figure in stone and chanted to it. Then it seemed to us watching there that from the gloom of the crevice

above the statue came a dim light, first a faint, faint glimmer, then a stronger glow, till suddenly a shaft of red light shot up, a crimson blade of radiance that played right across the roof of the cave. How it was done we never discovered, but it impressed the crowd undoubtedly, for there was a long 'Ah!' of wonder.

With an evil smile on his lips the priest returned the bowl to the woman, turned again to the crowd, and spoke. Then he ceased, and as the music began again, men and women alike rose to their feet and broke into a wild dance, of whose meaning this time there was no doubt. It was a war-dance of the most barbaric, with flash of knife and waving spear, and wild shrill calls of women.

Then slowly, slowly, men and women drew apart, until a way was formed between them right across the cave to the shadowed rock-cut cells at the farther end, where some men were engaged in lighting a new fire. Presently the music slowed and the dancing ceased, and the party on the platform stepped down on to the floor, save for Baz Khan and the priest, who stayed there, while the rest of their following led Gobind a few steps down the centre of the cave. Then they followed, and at a word from Baz Khan the whole party moved slowly down the cave between the watching men and women on either hand towards the new-lit fire at the farther end, Gobind, looking dazed and bewildered, stepping between them.

CHAPTER XVIII

'THE END OF BAZ KHAN

THE party had reached the middle of the cave when Frank shouted 'Let 'em have it,' and to the echo of his words came the crack of the rifles and the duller crash of the shot-guns. Of the four men holding the ropes three went over, pulling the Sikh to his knees, two to lie still, and one to writhe his way among the startled crowd. The fourth, for whom Rassula should have accounted, was missed in some inexplicable way, and stood there a second looking dazedly about him.

'Gobind! Gobind! Is taraf daurke āo!'

Frank's voice echoed above the sudden shouts and screams, ably seconded by Lal Singh's call —

'A-jāo jaldi bhai! A-jāo is taraf!' followed by the report of his rifle, and the fourth man with Gobind crumpled slowly, and suddenly crashed forward on his face, jerking the Sikh to the floor by the rope he still held. Gulab's second barrel must have only just missed Baz Khan, for that worthy leapt to one side and then flung himself to cover under our wall of the cave, where we could not see him, the old priest stumbling in his wake.

At the noise of the rifles and the sight of the stricken men, the crowd panicked for a moment, and then seethed over to the farther side of the cave, jamming the passage in a struggling mass.

Frank was shouting to Gobind to come across, and then, suddenly realising that the man was unable to get free from the dead hands that still

clutched the rope, a loop of which had been twisted about the holder's wrist, leapt to his feet, and dashed down the narrow passage on his right, shouting to Gulab and Lal Singh to follow him.

Unfortunately Gulab lost his head then, probably sheer excitement, combined with annoyance, at having missed his enemy for the second time. Instead of following Frank, he let drive at the crowd on the opposite side, and Rassula followed his example, the two of them firing as hard as they could into the packed throng, every bullet, of course, taking effect.

The people below, to whom we were practically invisible, realised only one thing — namely, that some unknown terror was slaying them there as they fought for the passage entry, and unreasonably in mob fashion they suddenly turned and came back across the cave in their efforts to escape the invisible death. They surged across the floor in a tearing mass of mixed men and women, just as Frank and Lal Singh reached the ground level.

'We'd better follow quick!' shouted Saunders to me. 'There'll be a scrum now, and we've got to hang together! Look after Miss Weston!'

He caught Gulab by the scruff of the neck, half hurled the Punjabi down the stairway, and raced after him. With Karima, Rassula, and Masalan, Valerie and I followed, and reached the main passage, to find it choked with a seething mob just ahead of us, where Frank and Lal Singh were firing into their very faces.

The panic-stricken cave people pressed upon them, and in another minute would have overwhelmed them, for here at least were tangible men of flesh and blood who might be grappled with instead of whispering whip-crack noises that maimed and slew

unseen. The arrival of Saunders and Gulab checked them for an instant, and then Rassula and I came up.

We fired into the packed throng over the shoulders of those in front — there was barely room for three abreast in the tunnel — and in another second they broke and fled back again into the great hall, scattering to right and left. We pushed forward in a body, the two women in the centre, over a jumble of dead or wounded men, one of whom stabbed upwards with a knife as I passed, and only Rassula's quick smash down with his gun-butt quieted him in time.

The passage mouth cleared before us, and we saw Gobind still struggling in the centre of the hall trying to free himself, while towards him, with hurrying steps and lifted knife, moved the evil-faced old priest. It was a very quick snap shot of Frank's that caught the priest as the blade was raised to strike, and the thin wizened body pitched forward upon the Sikh, bearing him to the ground again.

'Stand by!' shouted Frank, 'while Saunders and I pull him in. We don't all want to go out of cover.'

And with that he and Saunders dashed out into the open to help the Sikh back.

From the open mouth of the passage, where the rest of us had halted in response to his words, we could see the cave people diving into the various exits in the walls. Then I wondered. Where the devil had Baz Khan gone to? No shot had greeted Frank and Saunders as they broke from cover, and there they were now out in the centre of the hall undoing the rope about Gobind's throat. Another instant and he was free, and the three of them came hurrying back.

And just as they reached us we realised that Baz Khan had gathered some men, and, working down a

side passage, come in upon our rear. From the darkness behind us came the quick scurry of footsteps, and a dozen men surged in upon us. I had just time to thrust Valerie out into the cave mouth and draw my revolver as they closed, and the first man's face must have been touching my barrel as I pressed the trigger and saw him spin backwards. Rassula fired both barrels of his shot-gun into the body of another man so close that the coarse blanket the cave man was wearing smouldered, and then the shikari went down as two men leaped upon him clutching at his gun, while a third struck at him with a sword.

I dropped one of them, and then to my relief Frank and Saunders pressed up beside me and opened fire, and the cave men in front melted away again into the darkness. But as they went there came the report of a gun beyond them, and hearing a dull thud and a faint cry behind me, I turned to find Masalan leaning against the wall with her hand to her side, and the blood slowly spreading over the blanket she had thrown about her.

Another report, and Saunders dropped his rifle with an oath, clutching at his left arm. A lethal bullet had torn along the outside of the forearm, ploughing up the skin in a long gash, but luckily not catching the elbow. It was fortunate that the Punjabi had not fired buckshot, because at that range he would probably have browned the lot of us. But he couldn't have much left now except buckshot and small shot, since he'd already accounted for most of the round dozen of lethal bullets that Saunders had happened to have in his gun-case when caught.

'We must clear them out quick,' said Frank. 'We can't wait now. They may come round some other way. A volley, and then rush. Come on, Valerie,

quick; keep close behind us. You watch the rear, Jim, with Lal Singh.'

'Hold on a bit! We've got to drag Masalan along; she's badly hurt.' Valerie, sheltering behind a corner of rock, where somehow she had contrived to drag the wounded woman, was doing her best to staunch the flow of blood.

'Yes; and Rassula's a bit limp. One of them hit him over the head, I fancy. You and Gulab keep on firing while I haul him up.' Saunders bent down, and then I realised for the first time that the shikari was still on the floor with the bodies of the men we had killed.

Another shot from in front, which luckily whistled past our heads, and another that kicked up the dust in front and somehow missed everybody; and then Frank and Gulab, who had caught up Saunders's Mannlicher, burst into rapid as fast as they could fire.

To my relief as I turned to help Valerie I saw Rassula getting unsteadily to his feet.

'She's dying, Jim,' said Valerie to me in a despairing voice. 'Oh, can't we do anything for her?'

'Got to get out of this quick,' said I. 'They may get round behind us again if we don't move. See any one, Lal Singh?'

But the Sikh, who with his back to us was guarding the entrance to the great cave, reported that every one had vanished, leaving the cave empty save for the dead and wounded.

I bent down over the woman, and even in the uncertain light of the tunnel there was no mistaking the blanching features and the sweat on the face. She had evidently not very long to run.

'Take the rifle, Valerie,' said I, preparing to lift Masalan. Then Karima pushed me aside.

'You keep the gun, sahib. I can carry her better than you, and with that he swung Masalan on to his broad shoulders as though she was a feather.

'Ready?' called Frank from in front. 'Rassula's all right now.'

'Then let's clear quick,' I shouted back.

'Keep close, then. The moment I stop firing we rush.'

Once again the passage was filled with the sharp crack of the two rifles, and then suddenly they ceased.

'Leg it hard now, and keep closed up!'

We did 'leg it' then down the passage as fast as we could go, hampered, of course, by Karima's pace as he struggled along manfully with his burden. In another minute we were out of the glow of the fires in the cave and back into that foul darkness, where any number of the cave men might be waiting for us. We had to risk Baz Khan's gun and turn on the torch, lest we might slip into some side passage by mistake.

But luckily they had evidently had enough, and although we heard Baz Khan ahead shouting frantically to his following, we saw no one. If the cave men were there they must have melted into the side passages as we passed, and for my own part I let drive with my revolver into three of the passages as we slipped past them, just in case any one was sheltering there, and once I heard Lal Singh behind me do the same.

Then we slowed to a walk as we reached the place where Frank and his party had dealt with the sentries, and picked our way over the three bodies still lying there, going carefully lest we should set the stone shoots sliding on our heads. And then it was that Baz Khan gave evidence of his presence again

by two quick reports from in front, and a tearing hail of small shot that whistled about us, and stung Frank and Gulab, who were now leading, about the legs. Subsequent investigation revealed the fact that in the dark, or else because he had run out of buck-shot and bullets, the ex-jamadar had loaded with number eight, and there was no serious damage.

But it told us one thing, and that was that, all unknowing, Baz Khan, in his anxiety to score off us, had unwittingly run his head into a noose. For, as far as we could tell, being now without a guide, there were no more side-arms, and the only exit to the passage was on to the bear-pit; and on the farther side of the bear-pit was waiting Fateh Khan. And Fateh Khan was not likely to miss.

Probably Baz Khan thought that all he had to do was to keep before us and presently he would find himself in the open on the hillsides, where he could laugh at us if we tried to follow him up, since he would know the ground.

'We've got the stinker now,' said Frank, as we halted under cover at a turn to get breath, and to let Karima rest a while and hand over Masalan to Lal Singh. The bleeding had more or less stopped, and Valerie and I bandaged up as best we could with handkerchiefs the gaping hole under the ribs where the bullet had torn its way out. Masalan was very quiet over it all, and hardly winced, her great eyes fixed on Valerie's face all the time in the light of the torch.

'We'll go slower now,' said Frank, as Valerie finished and wound the blanket round Masalan again. 'It's clear Baz Khan hasn't got many men with him, perhaps none, and they can't follow us up. You can stop anything coming up from behind if necessary

with Lal Singh, who must hand over Masalan to Karima if anything does materialise. Keep Rassula by you, too, and the other three of us will keep some little way ahead. We must be close on the bear-pit by now.'

Then we set forward once again into the darkness, treading cautiously, for at any moment Baz Khan might realise his position, and with the realisation the last vestige of caution would probably vanish, and like a wounded beast he would simply lie close for a last chance to bite ere the end came.

And so it proved. We reached the straight bit of the passage leading into the pit, and there, against the faint light thrown by the lantern on the opposite brink, saw Baz Khan's motionless figure. He could not see us, for we had extinguished the torch, but he was silhouetted there clear to see, and he was alone.

He was peering out, and then suddenly realised the trap, for he drew back into the passage. We could not have been thirty yards from him, and he must have heard us. Frank told me that he had already raised his rifle to fire when he was brushed aside as Gulab leapt forward in frantic desire to close with his enemy. Frank and Saunders were at his heels, and, scenting trouble, I held the others back, and pushed Valerie down behind a shoulder of rock wall waiting for Baz Khan to fire.

I didn't see the rest, for the passage was blocked by the three running figures in front of me, but there was no report, only sounds of a struggle ahead, and then the passage way was clear. We moved on again after that, and, leaving the others to come slowly, I raced to the passage mouth, for I was anxious to see the end — an end only rendered possible by the fact, as we found later, that one of Baz Khan's cartridges

had slipped behind the extractor and jammed in the breech, so that it took us the best part of an hour to force it out and get the gun working.

As I came out on to the ledge I caught sight of Fateh Khan and the coolie standing upon the opposite brink, Frank and Saunders standing on our side, and just beyond them Gulab with lifted axe advancing on his cousin, who had shrunk back to the wall, still struggling with the breech of his gun. Then he realised that it was hopeless, and, swinging the gun up by the muzzle, leapt out at Gulab.

Neither Frank nor Saunders lifted their rifles. It was absolutely unnecessary to intervene, and in any case Frank's taste for man-to-man settlement would have rendered him loath to interfere unless things were going very wrong.

Gulab side-stepped just in time, and as the gun-butt whizzed harmlessly past, his axe shot forward, and the crescent edge hit into Baz Khan's temple just above the eye. The man crashed forward on to his face with the impetus of his wasted blow, and a little dark pool gathered about the dust below, and slowly spread as Gulab stood there looking down upon the man he had sought so long.

Then he rolled the body over, and made sure that the game was played out. Very quietly he turned to us, and his face seemed rather haggard and drawn in the dim yellow radiance from the lantern on the opposite side and the faint grey light of the cave, for the sun was evidently now risen.

'I told the sahib that if I had seven days and a gun I would find him. I knew that I should find him, and it is but a short seven days, and the reckoning is paid.'

'Surely but justice, Gulab,' said Frank. 'And now

with what we shall have to say doubtless all will be well with you on our return, and we will make things straight with the police, so that you may return to your land.'

Then he turned to the rest of us. Saunders was collecting his wrist-watch and other belongings from Baz Khan's pockets.

'That's one less scoundrel in the world, anyway. And now we'd better get across and on the home side. I fancy there'll be no more trouble, but I'd like to get back to the fort and see what we can do for Masalan, although I'm afraid it's very little.'

We had some difficulty in carrying her across the ledge, and it was chiefly by Karima's efforts that we succeeded in getting her over the plank at all. Then once we were all safely across the ledge we drew over the plank, and followed Karima and Lal Singh, who were bearing Masalan to her cave.

We laid her down for a little there by the light of the undying fire, where we found the old woman who had brought us the news of the impending sacrifice. She burst into wails at the sight of Masalan, who I suppose had been her mistress for so long. Then she caught her hand, and crouched by her, moaning pitiously. But Masalan would have but little of her, signing to Valerie to keep beside her, and in her turn would not let go of Valerie's hand. Of course, Valerie is the really understanding kind of person whom one would want to sit by one if one was dying or very ill, and Masalan seemed somehow to divine it.

Then closing the sliding stone door we continued our way, until we emerged in the daylight, with the sun now well up above the horizon, and came in time to the narrow path behind the waterfall, where the difficulties of the passage across the ledge had to be

faced again under even worse conditions, and this time it was Karima who, unaided, carried Masalan across slung in the blanket over his back.

'We'd better guard this place,' said Frank, as the last of us crossed. 'I don't think anything will happen, but one never quite knows, and we've had enough one way and another not to want any more accidents.'

So we left Fateh Khan and Lal Singh there to watch the path across the waterfall, with the promise that they would be relieved at nightfall, while the rest of us continued our way to the fort; and oh! but it was good to be out again in the open sunshine after those hours in the foetid atmosphere underground. We moved rather like people in a dream, it seemed to Valerie and me, after the unreal happenings we had been through, and it took the concrete reality of a madly excited Dog Bill tumbling down the fort steps with Taj Muhammad in tow to make us realise that we were not still dreaming.

Valerie insisted on Masalan having her bed and her tent, and so we laid her on Valerie's bedding-roll in the tiny tent, with her face towards the great snow mountains that had seen the early days of her open air life and hidden all the subsequent years.

We did our best for her, but there was little to be done. We weren't doctors in any sense of the word, but all of us had some little experience in wounds, and knew that she could not last very long, and the thought of losing this strange silent woman, whom we had never seen three days before, somehow threw a shadow over our joy at getting our party back practically unhurt.

It was all we could do to make her part with Valerie for the little time to get a bite of breakfast.

She couldn't speak much, and such little as she said had to be translated to Valerie by Karima, and Karima's Hindustani was of rather different variety to Valerie's. Both are fluent, but in different ways, and neither have heard much of grammar.

We were all pretty tired, and after breakfast Frank and I rebandaged Saunders's arm and Rassula's head, and then we all lay about in patches of shade getting what sleep we could, all save Valerie, who sat there in the tent — I looked in once or twice — still holding the dying woman's hand, and soothing her in some mysterious wordless kind of way.

CHAPTER XIX

WE LEAVE THE FORT

How Valerie kept awake I really don't know, for we were all dead-beat after the last few days. Saunders, despite an arm which was now very stiff and painful, curled himself up in the shadow of the tower base, and was asleep in five minutes; while Frank, after extracting a few of the more surface pellets from his shins and iodining the rest, pulled his bedding-roll alongside and followed suit. I was a little later off the mark — I haven't got Frank's gift of sleeping at will — but before long I, too, fell asleep — a heavy dreamless sleep of sheer fatigue.

It must have been about half-past four that I woke up somehow feeling that I was wanted, and found Valerie, looking completely fagged out, standing by me.

'What's up?' I asked, sitting up drowsily.

'I think she's going now, Jim; she's very weak indeed.'

I remembered Masalan, and reaching for my chap-lis slipped them on my aching feet, and stood up rather stiffly. The others woke too, then, and joined us.

'There's nothing more we can do now,' said Frank to me as Valerie went back to the tent. 'Possibly a doctor might have done something, but I doubt it. Those lethal bullets are fiendish things, and her chest is probably torn to bits inside.'

'Well, I'll go and stay with Valerie for a bit, since she won't leave Masalan. She might get a doze if some one else is there to wake her. We'd better send

up to relieve Fateh Khan and Lal Singh soon, I should think. Gulab and Gobind ought to have had some food and sleep by now. You did warn them, didn't you?'

'Yes; told them to be ready by half-past five. I'll go and see if they're awake. I expect, like every one else, they've been getting a sleep.'

I left him then, and going over to the little tent found Valerie again at her post, face dead white and heavy eyes, sitting there by the dying woman, for there was now no question but that she was dying fast. The face was bluish and the features pinched, while from time to time she fought for breath in a heart-breaking fashion, and then Valerie would lift her up a little to try and ease her and wipe the blood from her mouth.

Karima was dozing outside the tent, ready at hand if wanted to translate, but Masalan was beyond much speech now. Squatting at the corner of the tent was the old woman who had come back with us from the caves, wrinkled and old and somewhat toothless, grey hair draggled and eyes red with weeping, for she was evidently fond of her mistress. She huddled the blanket closer round her skinny shoulders and withered old breasts as a little breeze sprang up, but she took no notice of my entrance, from which I gathered that among the people of the caves there was little if any of the usual shyness of menkind that generally stamps the Asiatic woman.

'You ought to get a sleep, person,' said I softly to Valerie. 'You'll crock if you don't.'

'I'll sleep presently, Jim. I really daren't go to sleep now. She may go at any moment, and we owe her such a lot. I should hate her to die quite alone, even if we can't talk to her.'

'Well, I'm here now, and I promise to wake you if there's any signs of her getting worse.' I slipped my rolled-up poshtin behind Valerie's shoulders; she was sitting on the ground. 'Lie back, anyway, and shut your eyes, even if you don't sleep.'

She did consent to that, and presently, I think, slept for a few minutes at a time until another paroxysm on Masalan's part would wake her up again.

I sat on the other side — there was only just room to squeeze into the tent — trying to sort out my very jumbled impressions of the last three days. There seemed to have been hardly time to think. My memories were a kaleidoscopic mixture of dark tunnels, fire-lit caves, the crack of rifles, the screams and yells and weird music, the foul odours, the tense moments of struggles in the darkness, and the one salient fact that undoubtedly I owed my life to Valerie opposite, a slim, tired little figure in her tunic and knickers, now all stained and dirty — torn, too, in one place, and showing some very dainty *dessous*.

Then I became aware that Masalan, who had been lying quieter of late, had her eyes fixed on me. I tried to find her pulse, which took some time, and her hands were icy cold, although the air was warm and the evening rather close, despite the little breeze which sprung up when I first came into the tent.

She seemed to want me to do something, though I could not quite make out what. Then I realised that she was drawing my attention to the tent door behind me. At last I guessed that she wanted the flies thrown back — a guess that proved correct, since when I had moved them and the tent stood open, she seemed content.

The movement woke Valerie, who sat up hurriedly, and I explained what I had done. Through

the open tent door we saw the whole sweep of the great snows in front, crimson now in the rays of the fast-setting sun, peak and long snow slope, rounded dome and fantastic pinnacle, under a transparent blue sky without a single wisp of cloud. Redder and redder they grew, almost maroon in places as the sun sank lower, a wild unearthly landscape of snow that seemed turned to blood.

Masalan lay there silent gazing at the snows, and then presently she disengaged her hand from Valerie's, who had held it even in her sleep, and tried, oh so feebly, to push back the blankets. Valerie bent over her, thinking that perhaps the bandage was paining her, or that the wound had broken out again, but the clotted bandages were still in place, and there seemed no new flow of blood. But the cold trembling hand was not seeking that; it strayed up and down her bosom until it came to rest on the great necklace of stones which was still about her throat, and there it stayed.

Then she plucked at them as though trying to free them.

'Perhaps they're uncomfortable,' I whispered. 'I'll lift her the least little bit, and you can slip them off.'

I slid my arm under her shoulders and raised her a trifle, and Valerie slipped off the rope of dull-red stones that seemed now to match the crimson snows beyond. We could see by Masalan's expression that that was what she had wanted, for she lifted her hand and held it out until Valerie put the necklace into it, and it dropped back feebly, and she lay quiet, as though gathering strength for some new effort.

Then she turned her head towards me again, and her eyes sought my arm.

'I think she wants you to lift her up a little,' said

Valerie, and again I raised her just a trifle, for I was frightened lest the wound might break our anew. It was clearly what she had meant, for then she drew Valerie closer, and with infinite difficulty slipped the barbaric ornament over her head, and the red stones slipped into place round Valerie's throat above the little silver lorgnette chain, and fell down upon the dusty brown folds of her tunic.

I was going to let Masalan down again, when suddenly it seemed to me that she quivered as though with a new access of strength, and the next instant she was sitting bolt upright, arms outstretched, chanting in a deep rich voice, her eyes fixed on the snows. She spoke for perhaps half a minute, and I saw Karima outside sit up listening.

Then she sat silent for a breath, her face aglow from the crimson radiance opposite, her great eyes of curious yellow hazel widely open, her very finely cut lips just apart. Then suddenly and without warning she fell back against my arm, struggled for breath for an instant, and was still. I laid her back on the pillow, and this time there was no pulse to be found. Masalan had gone out beyond the snows for all time.

'She's gone now, I'm afraid, Valerie,' said I at last, and Valerie said nothing as she straightened out the luxurious hair, but I could see that her lips were moving and her eyes were damp. Then the old woman broke into a shrill death wail, and we hadn't the heart to stop her, so we left her there with her dead mistress, whose short life had finished so stormily.

'What did she say, Karima?' I asked as we stood up outside the tent

'She spoke of her gods, sahib. She called to them

also, it seemed. Then I think she called to the people of the snows, and warned them that the gods were angry with them for following Baz Khan and not her, and for seeking to slay folk who had not harmed them. And then she said that punishment would fall upon them, and the gods would strike. Doubtless she was somewhat mad, as are the *Bhut parast* very often. Also she was near her end.'

But for all his contempt for followers of idols I could see that he was uneasy, and not anxious to linger near the tent. Valerie and I stood there a moment after he had gone, gazing at the snows, now rapidly losing their crimson glow, as they paled and paled, first to delicate rose and then to cold pink, then to still colder blue, and at last to dead white against the darkling sky, for the moon was not yet up, though behind us a faint silvering showed that she could not be far off.

Valerie shivered a little, and I flung my poshtin about her shoulders as we walked silently over to the tower base, where Taj Muhammad was laying out the evening meal.

We found Frank and Saunders there overhauling the latter's gun and his express-rifle, which, apart from the smashed-off stock and the dented tang of the breech, seemed to have taken no great damage from its fall into the pit, and we told them about Masalan. Neither of them said anything much, but presently Saunders went off, and later on when I looked into the tent I found that he had gone to get his sole remaining silk handkerchief to lay over her face.

It was a very quiet meal indeed, with but little conversation, and directly it was over we busied ourselves rigging up a shelter for Valerie to keep the

moonlight off her, since she would not let Masalan's body be taken out of the tent, and as soon as it was ready we sent her to bed, not that she wanted much pressing on the matter. We three men sat talking and smoking for a short time and then followed her example.

Very early next morning Frank turned me out, and, taking the two coolies and Karima with the spades and picks, we went down the stairway, picking up *en route* the dead body of the cave man who had been killed in the bridge-head the previous night and still lay in the recess. We found a suitable piece of ground below the fort, near the old ruins, and there we set the two coolies to bury the man, while Frank and I dug a grave for Masalan. The soil was fairly easy, and by half-past eight we had it ready, while the coolies were just filling up the earth in the other one.

We returned to the fort for some breakfast, and found Saunders and Valerie up, the latter looking a good deal better for a night's rest. Saunders and Taj Muhammad had contrived a rough blanket stretcher with the aid of the saplings we had ripped up to make the ladders, while Valerie had done what she could for Masalan, and the dead woman really looked quite wildly beautiful lying there in the morning light.

Frank and I carried her down the cliff stairs, and we buried her looking towards the snows, Saunders's silk handkerchief to protect her face from the falling earth, and I think we were all rather upset over it, although we had only known the strange wild creature for a couple of days, and then only been able to speak to her through an interpreter. But as Saunders pointed out, except for her, Gulab, Gobind, and

himself would have been dead by now, and in all probability the rest of us might have met a similar fate if we'd endeavoured to force our entry by the ladders, as originally proposed. I think he was somewhat afraid of being suspected of sentimentality in the matter of the silk handkerchief, for I rather suspect him of a well-concealed vein of romance, which may be the reason for his carefully assumed garment of cynicism, a garment notably absent that morning.

When it was over and we had piled up a mound of stones from the ruined foundations, we returned to the fort, where Frank stoically endured my well-meant efforts to remove some more shot pellets from his shins, and we tortured Saunders's arm with our only remedy — iodine — a drug beloved of the Westons. The wound looked fairly clean, though ragged.

After that we began to consider what we should do next. The fort, devoid of any shade, was getting unpleasantly hot, for of late the valley had got warmer, and to-day was most unaccountably sultry for the altitude we were at. Not only was the direct sun scorching — that was natural enough at the height — but the air was heavy, and the whole impression was of lurking thunder, although the sky was cloudless.

'There's no doubt about what we bumped into,' remarked Saunders. 'It's an old set of mine workings for a cert. And the look of the people inside confirms the idea that they are the remains of the original workers, and in all probability slaves. Though how or why they stopped here when the original owners left beats me.'

'Probably the owners cleared out at some change

of power, biennial invasion, or else perhaps murder of the local ruler, and broke down the bridge before going, so as to ensure that the slaves wouldn't be able to get away. They may have been recalled to help in some scrapping, and were told to do that, thinking that when the trouble was over they could come back and find everything *in situ*.'

'And the bloke in the ice got left on the wrong side, I suppose, and presently the slaves, finding what had happened, proceeded to take it out of him. Poor devil! But from what one reads of those times, he probably earned all he got,' said Saunders. 'I should say you were right, Weston. If they'd left the bridge, and it had simply rotted away in the course of years, the people in the caves would have cleared out sooner or later when they found their masters never came back.'

'Well, what are we going to do now? I suppose we shall have to report the whole affair, which is a damned nuisance. What's more, we haven't seen very much nor got very much out of it for our trouble, and we shall be dicked and worried *ad lib*.'

'We've got something, anyway, Everitt,' answered Saunders, putting his hand into his pocket. 'I grabbed a couple of fistfuls of stones off the priest man as we came away with Gobind.' He drew his hand out of his pocket and dropped a cascade of the red stones on to the table. 'Some flawed, of course, but a lot of good ones. And then we've got the ones that Masalan had, and the necklace things they hung on Gobind. We ought to see a few thousand pounds for our trouble if we can get them away and sell them at home by degrees.'

'Good enough,' said Frank, as he picked up one or two of the stones and examined them. 'Personally,

I'm for clearing out. I don't think there'd be much fight in them now that we've disposed of Baz Khan, but one never knows, and we can't very well start exploring the caves again. It's a bit too risky.'

And we all agreed that for the moment, anyway, we'd had as much as we wanted of the underworld. The open sunshine was quite good enough. Valerie in particular was very emphatic on the point.

'Then in that case I suggest that we move back to our original camp at the top of the plain. There is shade there, trees and water handy, and it will be cooler. It'll take us a couple of days, but we've got four sheep still' — they were bleating near us at the moment — 'and they can carry something.'

Frank's suggestion was carried unanimously, and we set to roping up loads as fast as we could, for we were all anxious to get away from this grilling rock and its not over-pleasant souvenirs.

The first convoy started after lunch, Frank, Valerie, and Saunders, the two coolies, Rassula, Taj Muhammad, and the cook with the laden sheep, leaving me with Karima, Lal Singh, Fateh Khan, and the old woman, who clamoured to return to the caves. She was frightened of the outer world, it seemed, and wanted to go back to the darkness where she had spent all her life.

We decided to put her back across the bear-pit, where she could find her way to her own folk, and after the convoy had left, taking the men with me, I went back to the falls, where I found Gobind and Gulabensconced in the shade of the tunnel, the former fast asleep. They had seen and heard nothing, which was what I expected, since Masalan had always been very insistent on the fact that no one but herself knew of the sliding-door. It was an amazing piece of

luck that she had kept her find to herself, but I fancy there had always been a feeling of aloofness between her and the true cave people, even after she had settled down there.

When we reached the bear-pit we slid the plank across, and the old woman hurried away into the darkness. We had told her to tell the people inside that if they left us alone we should leave them alone; but in any case before long there would be whole lots of men coming up with guns, and then they would have to account for their doings, so that their only hope now lay in keeping quiet, when perhaps we would do our best to explain that the real blame lay upon Baz Khan and his particular friends.

Whether she would be able to make our meaning clear, and whether they would understand the references to troops and police even if she did, was pretty doubtful, but it was all we could do, and in some ways we all felt rather sorry for the wretched devils.

Before we left the pit I went down on a rope to have a look at the bear — a gigantic beast — and at the man who lay beside him. The steel cap attracted my attention, and I picked it up — a rusty old thing of Indian pattern. But later, when it was cleaned up, it proved rather a find, since it was of good workmanship and very old. An expert to whom we showed it on our return set it down as early sixteenth century, although whether it had been in the mines all that time was another matter. But taken in conjunction with the great carving we had seen, it pointed to the mines being of considerable antiquity.

When we got back to the falls I left Fateh Khan and Lal Singh on guard, and, taking Gobind and Gulab with me, returned to the fort, where we picked up as much kit as we could carry, left the rest under

cover, and set out for our camp, which we reached well after dark. It was pleasant to come back to the tents and the other creature comforts we had missed these last few days, best of all to sit down to dinner complete again, and with all our following safe, save for the one unfortunate coolie, who had been killed at the outset.

We decided that so long as we remained there we would always have some one on guard on the falls, just in case anything happened. One man there with a gun could stop the whole of the cave people, whereas if they got out into the plain they might be very nasty, especially under cover of darkness.

Next morning we went back to the fort and brought up all the remainder of our kit, and towards evening sent Gulab and Karima to relieve the other two at the falls, sending one coolie with them to carry a certain amount of firewood, since there was none up there, and the evenings were cold by the fall, though elsewhere the nights even were warmish with the sudden heat-wave that had set in. The coolie could come back the following morning, when we proposed to send Rassula, whose head, somewhat bruised by the sword blow, which fortunately had turned on the fold of his Balaclava cap, was now more or less all right, down to the valley to collect coolies, so that we could leave the plain and go down to the lower levels. Lal Singh was to go with him, and we cautioned both to keep their tongues very quiet, and to say nothing as to what had happened, and not to refer to the coolie we had lost. Time enough to mention him when we had actually got coolies up to camp. Otherwise they might get even more scared, and refuse to come at all.

It was hotter than ever that night when we went

to bed, and though we all slept outside the tents, even then we found our blankets mostly superfluous. A few clouds would have been a welcome sight, but none showed, although there was a hazy mist at sundown, more a heat haze than anything else, and not a breath of wind stirred anywhere.

I for one didn't sleep very well, and somehow Masalan kept on running through my thoughts — Masalan and her last dying words about the gods being angry. It was all rubbish, of course, merely the delirium of a dying woman, and a particularly uncivilised one at that, who had spent all her life just under the high snows where superstitions are always rampant. Still the idea would persist, and when I did get to sleep it was to dream of the impassive-faced demon we had seen carved in the rock, and he got mixed up with the face I had seen in the gloom just before Valerie fired her pistol. Altogether it was a poor thing in nights, and when Taj Muhammad appeared with some tea in the early morning I was rather glad to give up the pretence of trying to sleep. The others, too, seemed to be in the same state, with the exception of Frank, who was sleeping peacefully, for I caught sight of Valerie in her brown greatcoat playing with Dog Bill under the trees, instead of being what she would usually have been at that hour, fast asleep.

It was a close hazy morning, and there did seem to be some clouds about now as I sat up to drink my tea, and then stopped, for the stuff was rocking from side to side of the cup where Taj Muhammad had poured it out — an accident had reduced us to one teapot, which had to do duty for every one. Then as other things rocked too, I understood, and was out of bed in a flash.

CHAPTER XX

THE EARTHQUAKE

I SUPPOSE I had been too drowsy the moment before to notice the distant rumbling and tremors, like those one feels when standing over a tunnel where a train is passing, but the moment my feet touched the ground I realised why the tea was shaking. For an instant the whole earth about us seemed to be moving. Frank came tumbling off his camp-bed, and Valerie dashed out of the trees for an open space, Dog Bill yelping at her heels, evidently thinking it some new game.

Then as the tremor ceased a moment, far off we heard the distant crash and roar of slipping snow and rock, the noise muffled by the distance, but still distinctly audible. Then another tremor and yet another, and the branches of the pines about us rustled as though a breeze had sprung up, for all that the air was uncannily still.

A confused shouting from the cook's shelter, where apparently the motion had upset a degshi of scalding water over his fingers, mingled with the crash of a pile of enameled iron crockery carelessly piled up on a yakhdan, broke on the silence, followed by Frank's yell to every one to get out into the open away from the trees as a still more pronounced tremor shook the ground under our feet.

But the worst was already over, and though from the high ridge behind us we heard the grinding noise of sliding rock, followed by the soft swish of air, displaced by slipping masses of snow higher up the

mountain, no further damage took place in camp. A few minor shocks followed, less and less in intensity, and we were left in peace, the cook lamenting his burnt fingers with a flow of Kashmiri oaths, Taj Muhammad gathering up the dented cups and saucers, and Saunders, disturbed in the midst of his toilette, wondering whether it was safe to go back and get on with his shaving. Luck generally seemed against him on these occasions, and although his pyjamas were joyous to the eye, the partly lathered face was less beautiful.

‘I bet that’s upset things a bit over there,’ said Frank, looking out across the plain to the great snow peaks. ‘See that cloud of dust going up there! By the look of it, it’s somewhere near the caves, and I fancy it will have scared the coves inside more than a little.’

‘If it hasn’t buried them completely,’ I put in. ‘It wouldn’t take very many tons of rock to choke those entrances altogether; and the snow above is probably sliding in all directions now. Listen; can’t you hear something?’

The others listened, and remarked on my powerful imagination, but my contention was somewhat supported when with a pair of glasses we could make out occasional falling boulders and slipping snow that slid slowly downwards, gathering way until it was lost in an uprush of white mist and cloud as it shot over some precipice on the face of the sheer peaks.

‘I hope to goodness that Gulab and the others are all right,’ said Frank, after watching a little while. ‘I think that we’d better go along and have a look directly after breakfast.’

India — we learnt many weeks afterwards — recorded it as a ‘small disturbance,’ and located it

fairly accurately. But from our point of view it seemed anything but small even there in camp as we sat down to breakfast, and when we reached the ravine later in the day we should have been very rude to any one who had used the official term to us.

For now, closer to the mountains, we could see the havoc that had been wrought as a consequence of the earth tremors. Perhaps they themselves had not effected much, but the resultant avalanches had considerably altered the appearance of several points which had become familiar to us these last few weeks. Where had been smooth snow slopes were now gaunt bare rock faces, and what had been pinnacles of black rock were now sloping mounds of piled snow.

Snow was still slipping even now after several hours, and twice we heard the dull sullen roar of distant avalanches, and once we were in time to catch one actually on the move, and saw the snow slipping forward in a wave, gathering way, faster and faster, until it launched itself out over a precipice and fell in a glittering white mass, speckled with the black dots of boulders, to vanish with an angry roar into the unseen hollows below.

But when we reached the fort rock at one point we found a certain change in the hitherto precipitous bank, where a conglomerate face had slipped badly, leaving a slope to the water's edge, which, though far from easy, might possibly be descended at a pinch.

'We might cross the ravine now by that slip,' remarked Frank.

'Yes, and then get crushed under the cliffs by falling rocks or snow,' put in Saunders, who had been busy with his glasses. 'We'll wait and see for a day or two yet before we risk anything like that, for those

avalanches may go on for several days yet. But tell you what. Doesn't it seem funny that one can't see anything of the blokes from the caves? Should have thought they'd have been out in the open away from the cliffs now.'

'They're probably very wisely sheltering inside,' said Frank. 'That hollow round the entrance must be rather nasty with falling rocks just at present.'

'Perhaps — perhaps not,' remarked Saunders enigmatically. 'But meanwhile we'd better shove along to the falls and just see that Gulab and the other two are all right.' He put his glasses back into their case, and set off down the stairway, while the rest of us followed him.

On the way we stopped to repile some of the stones on Masalan's grave, which had been dislodged by the earthquake. We didn't want the wandering jackals or other beasts to have any chance there, although we had buried her as deep as we could.

Valerie and I had delayed over this, and had to hurry on after Frank and Saunders, whom we found standing together on the brink of the ravine about a quarter of a mile from the entrance to the falls, evidently considerably disturbed, looking down with Rassula at something below them.

'What is it?' we asked as we came up.

'A man's body, by the look of it. See; floating in that back water there,' replied Saunders. 'Don't like it. Can't be one of the coves from the caves very well, and the fellows who got knocked over the bridge that night couldn't have come back up-stream.'

I didn't like it either as I looked down. None of the cave people had khaki coats save Baz Khan, who had taken Saunders's, and anyway, he was dead inside above the bear-pit. But both Gulab and Karima

had khaki coats. At present the body was out of reach below us, and face downwards, so that identification was impossible. Lacking any rope, there was no hope of reaching it at that point, but on our return we might be able to work our way down the slipped bank by the fort and retrieve it. We left Rassula there to watch and to follow down-stream in case the body got washed on farther, and, feeling very despondent, the rest of us pushed on to the cliff in front and up the winding ledge to the entrance of the tunnel.

And here we realised that there had been considerably more movement, for the ground was littered with newly slipped boulders and shattered rocks, and we trod very warily and silently, lest any untoward noise or movement might bring others about our heads. Then our worst fears were realised as we saw that the whole long shoulder of horizontally stratified rock hiding the fall had slipped several feet, and the entrance into the tunnel was completely blocked beyond hope of opening. And further, as we knew from previous experience, there was no way up over the cliffs. The party we had left on guard were either entombed in the tunnel or crushed to death under the slipping rocks, or else perhaps drowned in the waters below the falls.

It was a wicked trick of fate after the luck we had had in being able to rescue all of our folk except the first coolie from the people in the caves, and it was a very gloomy party that eventually retraced its steps back down the cliff to ground level.

'We ought to go in under the fall and see if there's anything to be found there,' said Frank, as we halted at the bottom. 'There might be just a chance. And, anyway, we can hail up, and if they're safe they can

shout back, and we'll have to find some way to get them down from the ledge.'

We hadn't gone very far, however, before we realised how small was the chance of finding any one alive. For apparently the whole thickness of the rock shoulder had slid slightly and crumpled, since at the foot of the clean-cut shaft we had first come upon, with the great cascade falling sheer into the deep pool below, was now a short tumbled slope of broken stone, upon which the water splashed mockingly. The narrow ledge behind the fall had obviously been smashed away in the slip, which it was now clear had included the whole length of the tunnel, and any one caught in tunnel or ledge must have been crushed in the collapse or swept to death in the pool below, in which now showed new fallen masses of rock.

'We can't climb that either,' said Frank despondently at length, pointing to the smooth polished faces and the perhaps even worse obstacles of the treacherous jumble of shattered shale with the water playing down on it and ready to slip and slide at the least pressure.

'Not a hope,' agreed Saunders, looking up. 'It's none too safe even here, I should say. We must risk shouting to them, but I don't think the poor devils can have had any chance at all.'

We shouted and whistled at intervals for the best part of an hour, but never a sound came back from above, and when Lal Singh, peering about, discovered what seemed to be the end of a gun-butt sticking out of a pile of tumbled rock on the opposite side of the water, we felt that we might as well give up the game. Examination with glasses revealed the fact that it was unmistakably the butt of a gun, either Frank's or mine, both of which had been left with the party

on the falls. It was impossible to get across the ravine to it on the other side, and there we had to leave it, wondering whether it marked the grave of either Karima or Gulab under the piled rocks.

We returned very quietly towards the fort, and there we found Rassula sitting on the staircase. He jumped up as we came round the corner, and his eyes were very sad.

‘It is my nephew, sahibs,’ he said quietly. ‘The waters moved him after you had gone, and I saw his face. Then he drifted down this way, and he is caught in the bank below us. With a short rope — nay, even with several putties tied together — we might reach him.’

Frank and I followed him to the edge, and there, still on his face, caught between two projecting rocks at the foot of the long slip below us — the water had risen a little owing to the narrow channel being partially dammed by falling earth — was Karima’s body.

‘If it is to be done it must be done quickly, or the water will hide him or carry him away,’ remarked Rassula. ‘If the sahibs will help, I will go down.’

‘It’s a risky job,’ remarked Frank to me; ‘but we can’t leave him there.’ He sat down and began to undo his putties; Rassula had already got his off. With Lal Singh’s and Saunders’s as well, we managed to make a rope sufficiently long just to reach from point to point on the slope, and four of us managed to work our slow way down to the bottom of the ravine.

With infinite difficulty we managed to haul up the body of Karima, as it indeed proved to be, with the back of his head badly smashed, and other bones broken too by the limp feel of his limbs. He had

doubtless been killed clean outright, swept off the ledge above the fall in all probability, and in any case even if not dead could never have come to again once in the water. The face was composed enough, and we hoped he hadn't suffered. It took us nearly two hours' work ere we were back again on the bank, since poor Karima kept on catching in projections on the way, and our rope was none of the best.

It was a very silent party that made its way back to camp that evening, where Rassula and the other Muhammadans buried Karima at nightfall, and we couldn't help thinking of Masalan's words and wondering what had happened to the unfortunate cave folk.

'We must go out again to-morrow and have another look,' said Frank after dinner. 'I'm afraid there's not a hope of finding Gulab or the coolie, but if we could get over the ravine we might be able to lend a hand to some of the other wretched devils over there. They've had the stuffing knocked out of them all right by now, and out in the open in daylight they can't do us any harm so long as we keep our eyes skinned.'

'We might be able to get across now that we can get down by the fort,' replied Saunders. 'There were several places along the opposite bank that looked climbable when I explored the first two days. I wish we had some more rope, though. There's practically nothing left except short bits. It all went in the bridge.'

We went next morning — the whole party of us, with all our guns in case of trouble, although we did not anticipate any. In any case, the cave people stood no chance against guns in the daylight; but after what they'd had, there was not much chance of

their attacking us, even if we did succeed in crossing.

The earthquake seemed to have had an effect on the weather, for the sultry spell had gone, and it was a beautiful, clear, cool morning with a slight breeze, and the change lifted our spirits a little, despite the tragedy of the previous day.

Once again we made our way down the slide by the fort — an easier task now that we knew which places to avoid from our previous day's experience — and found ourselves on the grassy bank of the stream which rippled placidly along in the shadows of the great walls — a laughing, glinting stream of snow-fed water, now running in a single deep channel, now breaking into two or three more shallow arms.

At no point did it seem very deep, save just where there happened to be a rock-bound pool or two, and we had no difficulty in finding several places where we were able to cross it without going in over our knees.

But it was a long time before we managed to find any way up the opposite bank, and the place where we eventually succeeded in making our way up a watercourse must have been nearly three miles downstream, and even then it was a climb that required a steady head and hands as well as feet. Still it was a practicable path that we could all follow.

'It's too late to go any farther to-day,' said Frank, as we lay on the opposite bank recovering from our scramble up. 'We'll have to come again to-morrow.'

'Or next day, probably,' replied Saunders. 'I don't expect the snows up there are anything like stable even yet. I heard one lot going just as we started down, and we don't want to get caught under the cliffs with an avalanche just moving. You re-

member the place where the caves are lies under a sheer precipice that ends in snow slopes running up God knows how many hundred feet.'

From my previous experience of snow and rock work I supported his views strongly, and we decided that we would wait three or four days if necessary until there was no sign of movement anywhere, and it would be reasonably safe to go close up to the mountain's foot.

The climb back was if anything harder than the climb up, and it was late when we got back under the fort, the ravine now in deep shadow. We made a detour there to avoid the body of one of the cave men who had been killed in the attack on the bridge. The fall had not made him pleasant, and the weather had been hot. The others with him had apparently fallen into the stream, and been carried away farther down — at least, we didn't see any of them.

Next morning we spent watching the mountains opposite with glasses, and there was no question but that Saunders had been wise, since as the sun got hotter we twice saw signs of snow movement, and not till three days of perfect cool weather had passed did Frank consider that things looked quiet enough to permit us to venture close up.

We started before dawn so as to get as long a day as possible, and the sun was only just up when we began our descent down to the water, over what was now to us a well-known path, though others might have called it a minor mountaineering feat. It's wonderful how very much less perilous a known line on even the worst kind of hill becomes compared with what it seemed on the first occasion.

We halted on the top of the farther bank for a bit of breakfast, and discussed our line of advance. The

main point which I held out for was that we should not follow the original path up the ravine to the caves, since if the cave people were still inclined to give trouble, it offered too many places where they could roll stones over without being seen. With Baz Khan gone, they could do us little harm out in the open, but in that sword-cut slit to the fields they could be very dangerous. An examination with our glasses of the hills farther to the south seemed to show several points where they were not so precipitous as we had found them by the lake.

Having spread ourselves out into regular military formation in case of trouble, Frank and Saunders leading, the two Sikhs and Fateh Khan on the flanks and rear, with Rassula, Valerie, and myself as main body, so to speak, we moved on towards the hills. But we saw nothing in the plain, and reached the foot of the cliffs without incident.

We kept much more to the left this time, and had the good luck to find a way up the heights without following the narrow nullah where we had first explored, and in time, after a good deal of stiff climbing, came out above the little enclosed plain with the fields. And here we found more traces of the earthquake action in bigger or smaller landslides. Pushing along the edge of the cliffs, we found ourselves at last in full view of the rock face where the cave entrances were; and there we stopped, as we realised what had happened.

In lieu of the smooth face under which we had kept guard during those three troublous days, there was an immense slope of piled snow mingled with gigantic boulders that stretched down irregularly from a point considerably higher than where the entrances of the caves had been, while high above it a

new scar in the cliff showed where great masses of weathered rock had been torn away by the avalanche or avalanches which had swept down into the narrow valley; and nowhere was there a single sign of life in the whole landscape.

The ledge where we had found Huddu's body had completely vanished, buried under the fallen débris, which choked it right back as far as the turn where poor Gulab's ill-timed movement had caused the first cave-dweller we had seen to flee back into the caves. From there a long sloping tongue of mixed boulders and snow fanned out down the gorge, where somewhere below us stood — unless the ice screen had crumbled — the dead man who guarded the entrance.

'Not forty men with forty mops,' said Saunders as he sat on the edge of the cliff, which prevented us going down. 'Not three pioneer battalions in three weeks either. It would take weeks and weeks with explosives and unlimited labour to clear that lot out. Masalan was right. They've been just wiped out — wiped out.'

'Hundreds of thousands of tons piled up against that face,' answered Frank, apprising the scene with a sapper's eye. 'Poor devils! Poor, poor devils!'

We lingered there a little in the silence, and I suppose each of us thought of the unspeakable tragedy of the end of those men and women walled up in the mountain beyond. We had no particular cause to love them after the way they had nearly done some of us in, but after all it was partly Baz Khan's fault, and he was a maniac. And none the less they were human beings, even if on rather a low scale, and there they were, nearly a hundred of them as far as we knew, if not already killed by the underground move-

ments and rock falls that must have taken place, doomed to certain death from starvation and thirst, for we knew that they got their water from outside. Masalan had told us that.

A thousand trained men with modern tools and appliances might have cleared some of the cave mouths after a month's work, provided that their labours did not dislodge other slides involving rescuers as well. But under no conditions whatsoever could a thousand trained men and the necessary appliances have been got to that out-of-the-way spot under three months, even if any one had believed our story and turned out the Kashmir State troops, the nearest detachment of whom was a couple of hundred miles away in a roadless country, and they were only about two platoons of infantry. As for the local inhabitants, they amounted to scattered villages of fifteen and twenty souls at intervals of a day's march, none of whom could be induced to come, and who could do nothing if they did come.

'The next bit of rough weather will bring that lot down, too,' said Saunders, pointing higher up the cliff, where a great outcrop of rock jutted out from the face above a new scar where the strata below had slipped away. 'And when that comes, heaven only knows what else it will start moving. By the winter the whole valley here will be choked with rock, and no one will ever know there was this hollow.'

'There's nothing to be done about it,' concluded Frank. 'Even if they're alive and had food and water and air for several months, we couldn't save them. Let's hope most of them got killed straight off. Probably there were a good many roof falls during the actual shocks.'

We left it at that, and made our way back to camp

with the firm determination to leave our nullah as soon as coolies could be got. Somebody has said that Tragedy has a cleansing effect on the soul, but we felt just then that we wanted to get away from it. The earthquake had nothing to do with us — it was sheer bad luck losing our three men, but that might have happened anywhere to any one. But now the complete destruction of the cave people seemed the finishing touch, and we all of us wanted only one thing, to get back to the lower levels, where life was a little less exciting, even if more humdrum.

We had one more fruitless search for any traces of Gulab and the coolie, but found nothing. Evidently both were buried under the piled-up rocks and boulders in the falls. Anyway, Gulab had achieved his quest and died content, and that is always something.

‘I’m glad we got some of the rubies out of it, anyway,’ remarked Saunders, as we made our way back to camp. ‘The mines are gone for good and all now, but I wish I’d been able to see the real workings when we were inside. The part we were in was not the actual place where the stones came from, I know; that was farther in somewhere. But we’ve got some very choice stones for our trouble.’

‘And what’s more, a reasonable chance of keeping them and realising them,’ said Frank. ‘Don’t you see, there’s no need to say anything at all now since the place has vanished. If it hadn’t, we’d have had to go back and report the whole show, and there’d have been no end of a shout. As it is, we can make our own men keep quiet; none of them have any idea of what the stones really are, as far as I can make out. As for Rassula and his man, they’re not likely to stir up any kind of a dust and get the Kashmir

authorities on their tracks. They don't want all sorts of minor officials chasing round in the hopes of getting something out of them. When we get back, all we have to do is to say — which is perfectly true, moreover — that we lost some of our men in a landslide caused by the earthquake, which every one will know of, for it must have been felt for some distance.'

As we continued our way back to camp we discussed the thing again and again, and there was no getting away from the fact that the earthquake had been altogether rather a providential affair for us, despite the ill-luck of losing three of our party in it. Apart from the possibility of realising such stones as we had got, we would be saved the endless worries of having to give an account of our adventures to the State Authorities in distant Srinagar and probably subsequent trouble if we wanted to travel far afield at some later date.

That night, sitting outside the tents, we agreed to make the best of this final turn of fate. It would be easy enough to keep our own Indians quiet, and Rassula would be only too content not to have anything noised abroad that might upset his chances with future sahibs in search of shikar, while compensation for the loss of his nephew and backsheesh beyond his wildest dreams would make him our faithful adherent for the rest of his life.

'Then me for home by the first boat I can catch,' said Saunders at the end. 'I'll take the stones and realise them, or begin to do so. It'll have to be a slow business, of course, but it can be done on the Continent. I've got a pal or two in the trade who'll put it through for me, and we shall be pretty unlucky if we don't get several thousand pounds between us.'

'Better even than deferred pay for war-time acting

rank,' remarked Frank. 'Yes; you'd better take the greater part of them, long 'un. As for the rest of us, we're going to go on trekking. There's lots to see elsewhere, but I've had enough of this part just now. I think we'll head off in Leh direction and have a look at the devil dancers and the Thibet border and shoot a bit.'

'And don't forget we've got to get back to Arcadia for the early part of September,' said his sister. 'Mary's going to be waiting for us there with the *Shamrock*.'

'And then there's the duck on the Wular in October, and after that the Barasingh up the Lidar,' I put in.

'But most specially Arcadia,' said Valerie. 'Think of the moon coming up over the Dal Lake!'

'Yes. I think I could laze a bit in a shikara,' replied her brother. 'It's a nice interlude to the strenuous life, and lately life's been over-strenuous.'

And on that we decided for bed.

CHAPTER XXI

ARCADIA AGAIN

THE great expanse of the Wular Lake lay under a cloudless blue sky, a sheet of unruffled blue, ringed on two sides with the great hills that towered up and up to end in the white peak of Haramukh. On either side of the deep channel in which our boat was slowly making its way were tangles of lake plants, lotus, and singara, in which water-birds scuttled away at the noise of our approach, the splash of the poles, or in deeper places the beat of the great heart-shaped paddles.

Mary Duncan had sent down a tiny dunga house-boat to meet us at Bandipur on our return, and we were now making our lazy way to Srinagar and Gag-gribal. The *Clover*, as we christened her, since she was to go with the *Shamrock*, was eventually destined for Frank and me, the two women living on the bigger *Shamrock*; but for this short journey the three of us had to pile on board — Valerie in the back room, while Frank and I shared the larger room in front, beyond which a tiny sitting-room served for meals. Saunders by now was at home busy, we hoped, in making our fortune out of the stones he had taken with him.

Frank was either asleep or drowsily buried in a novel in the sitting-room below — looking down we could see his bare feet sticking out of the window on the shady side — and Valerie and I were stretched on all the cushions we could find under a gay-striped awning on the tiny roof deck above the forward

room, Dog Bill asleep at our feet, glad, I think, for once not to be on the march.

The long road lay behind us, nine hundred miles or so of marching, week after week and month after month, from the time we had set out over the Zoji La, down the Dras and Suru, the Indus and Shyok Valleys, to Frank's lost nullah, where we had fallen into such amazing adventures. From there we had gone on into Ladakh in search of ibex and strange sights and places and peoples, lamas and lamaseries and devil dancers and the high snows, until at the end we had stood on our highest pass, and from close on eighteen thousand feet looked down upon the distant haze of Chinese Turkestan, and registered a vow to go there, too, some day.

Then back again towards Astor, and so round by the foot of Nanga Parbat, where Mummery and his Gurkhas are buried in the eternal snows, and so over the Kamri pass and down the long pine and fir-clad slopes, until we reached the beginning of civilisation at Bandipur on the Wular Lake, whence runs the road to Gilgit and Hunza and other delectable corners of Asia, where there are neither roads nor trains, nor cars nor trams, and people live as they lived three thousand years and more ago.

And now here we were quite ready for a spell of Arcadia after it all as a prelude to the autumn shooting before leave drew to an end, and we had to go back to harness again for a while. We had quite decided that whatever the rubies brought us we were not going to 'chuck the service.' Neither Frank nor I felt that we were ripe for the idle life just yet. The possession of sufficient money to take such leave as we wanted and go wherever we listed was good enough; good work in good regiments was the pleas-

ant salt that really made the leave savoury. For I think there is no life to compare with the professional soldier's life in a good 'push,' and both Frank and I had the fortune to be in good pushes, corps of tradition, of first-class fighting men; and there is no better company to be found in all the world.

Valerie was half asleep with the drowsy warmth and the heavy still air, so different to the thin stuff we had been breathing of late at the higher altitudes. She always says that the air at anything under six thousand feet is the wrong mixture for her, wherein she differs from Frank's car, whose carbureter is set for the floor level. I looked at her lying there with an unread book, in a summer frock for once in a way, and I wondered how many people who didn't know would connect her with the little brown-clad figure in the boyish tunic and shorts, pistol in one hand, who had stood by me in that dark passage where the cave man's body lay twitching in the gloom.

She was brown as a berry now, as were we all after over four months in the open air, and I wondered what she'd do when in another three months or so she would have to put on evening dresses in Pindi again. And then I thought of a certain genial old Colonel and his wife with their preconceived notions of what really made up life, and the thought tickled me so that I laughed aloud, which brought Valerie back to consciousness.

'What's the joke, Jim?' she asked, lazily sitting up and smoothing out her skirt.

'Merely thinking of you and the Hazlitts away back in Pindi. Wondering what Ma Hazlitt would have said if she'd met you in the tunnel when we were rescuing Gobind.'

'I've a fairly good imagination, but it isn't gym-

nastic enough to picture that combination,' replied Valerie. 'But I'm jolly glad I had the sense to refuse to stop in the fort that evening.'

'Not half so glad as I am,' replied I, foolishly.

'Nonsense! Is a child gladder to be born than a mother to give life? There's always infinitely more joy in giving than in getting, especially for a woman, and I suppose I really did give you life that night. I don't think Rassula could have reached the man in time.'

'I know he couldn't,' said I suddenly, grave at the ever-recurrent memory of what I owe her. Valerie is such an essentially motherly little person, with the proper kind of motherliness that doesn't want to spoil, only to protect and help where protection and help ought really to be given, and ready to stand aside where the child or man ought to stand on his own feet. And I suppose that memory of the caves accounted for the silence which came over us both for a while, though we are often quite silent together even if upon occasion we can talk as hard as any one else.

And so in the course of the morning we came to the entrance of the Neru Canal above Ningle, and saw moored below us a line of house-boats, where the optimists were waiting for the mahseer to run downstream from the lake, and we turned into the canal that cuts off many turns of the slow winding Jhelum on the way to Srinagar.

We tied up near Haritorh that night, and made plans with Rassula as to coming back there later, when the fighting duck came in on their way into Hari Singh's great reserved jheel. It was warm, and there were mosquitoes when the sun went down, but later they vanished, and we sat out on the roof —

glad to be cool again — and calculated that the moon would be at her best all next week on the Dal Lake.

Next day we were away up the canal again, and the banks looked so attractive that Valerie and I got off and walked for a while under shady willow-trees on the tow-path, and made Bill swim for sticks. But Frank flatly refused to leave his Rurki chair and his book even when we passed under the high bridge at Sumbhal, where we came back into the main stream once more, and the whole crew were out waist-deep in the water pulling the *Clover* up against the rapids. Only when the cool of the evening saw us at Shadi-pur did he raise sufficient energy to dig out his rod and try his luck in the Sind — energy that was rewarded on that occasion — and we had fish for dinner, new caught and delicious.

An early start and a long day's pull up-stream and at three o'clock the three of us left the *Clover* to come on from the lock, and in a ramshackle tonga, the harness of which had to be patched with the sling of my haversack, we drove through Srinagar, and so out to the little track leading to Gaggribal.

And there just after tea we came upon the *Sham-rock* once more, moored in the identical spot where we had been in the spring, and found Mary having tea in her bathing-kit, with the shikara waiting alongside to take her for her evening swim, for she had not expected us to arrive till close on dinner-time. That haversack of mine had contained bathing-kit and a couple of towels, and, having sent the women off, Frank and I hurriedly changed in the sitting-room and followed them.

Gaggribal Point, where there is clear weedless water for a space, was crowded with people, and there were long lines of boats on either side, and,

wondering how Mary had contrived to get such a delectable mooring spot for her boat, we asked her as we swam up to where she and Valerie were sitting in the water on a stone under a willow-tree.

‘Get it? Sheer persuasive tongue, people! You should have seen me standing knee-deep in the water in my bathing-kit arguing with a boat that was trying to pinch it.’

It may have been a persuasive tongue, but it would take a very stern person to get the better of Mary under those conditions, or under any conditions whatever for that matter.

It was a long time since we had had a chance of bathing anywhere, certainly of swimming. Upon occasion we had lain in small mountain pools and called it bathing, but it was not the real thing that we found here, and it required a lot of stern self-discipline to come out. Frank insisted on swimming a long way back up-stream beside the shikara, which Mary, Valerie, and I were paddling.

We passed various acquaintances, who splashed up and shouted to know what we were doing back in civilisation, and made rude remarks about our parti-coloured skins, just now painfully conspicuous in bathing-kit with arms and necks and knees jet-black in comparison to the untanned skin above and below.

Then we changed — Frank and I standing in pools of water in the sitting-room — after which we climbed on to the roof, and waited a long time for the women to appear again. I suppose Valerie was trying to condense four months’ wanderings into an hour or so for Mary’s benefit as they dressed.

‘Well, you’ve had no end of time!’ remarked Mary, as they appeared at last. ‘Don’t I wish I could have come with you!’

And then we had to tell all the story all over again, filling in the bits that Valerie had left out, until it was time for dinner, and we sat down once more after so many months of camp life to a snowy tablecloth and real glasses and bowls of flowers, and one special bowl of lotus, the last survivors of the lotus month now just finishing.

'I went all the way to the Nishat this morning to get those in honour of your return to Arcadia,' said Mary after dinner as she lit a cigarette. 'I couldn't let you come back to Arcadia in lotus time without having some blooms to meet you. And to-morrow we'll go there again and spend the day under Nur Jahan's chenars.'

The scented dusk had closed down and the sky was silver with the moon before we heard the splash of poles and saw the *Clover* gliding up towards us, and heard the shouts and hails from the crew. They moored her side on to us, and ran a plank across, and then, of course, we had to produce Masalan's necklaces — the only stones we had not entrusted to Saunders — for Mary's admiration.

'Oh, what a story!' said she — the author's instinct for copy coming up — as she handed them back to us. 'Are you going to write it, you two?' Valerie and I looked at each other. 'I suppose we ought to. Of course, nobody will believe it,' said I.

'And just as well, all things considered,' added Valerie. 'Otherwise we should probably have the rubies confiscated, and I couldn't bear to part with these ones, anyway.' And she hung the dull red rope round her neck as she sat there in her gay summer frock — a rope of stones that, had they been properly cut, an empress might have coveted.

'I always said you'd find romance,' remarked

Mary at last. 'It's always to be found if only one has the heart to seek.'

'We certainly did find it,' said Frank. 'Lots of it, though a bit hectic at times.'

'But worth it every time,' replied Mary. 'Romance is cheap at any price.'

'That's the dreamer speaking,' said I. 'But I think we are a company of dreamers really; even Frank dreams sometimes, only he's too proud to admit it.'

And for once in a way he failed to contradict us, and suggested that we ought to celebrate our return to Arcadia by a turn on the lake in the moonlight in the shikaras, a suggestion carried unanimously, and even supported by Dog Bill, for whom it meant dodging the horrors of the ladder to the roof, where we should otherwise have gone.

We drifted out into the moonlight, the windows of the house-boats moored on the banks a long succession of yellow stars against the shadowy masses of the trees, and long, broken, yellow pencils of light on the rippling water. The moon, nearing her full, was well up in the sky, putting to shame the little stars and the blazing beacon of electric light on the shrine at the top of the Takht, and the softest breezes played across the lake from the hills opposite.

'Good to be back in Arcadia for a bit, isn't it?' said I to Valerie, as we watched the slow silver splashes where Frank and Mary's boat was drawing away from us.

'More than good, Jim,' she replied, as she lay back on the cushions, one hand trailing in the water, the ropes of stones still round her throat catching the moonbeams now and then as they rose and fell with her slow breathing. 'More than good.'

'We've gone through a lot since last we saw the moon over the Dal Lake, haven't we?'

'It seems a lifetime really, and yet it's only a few months. But then we've lived all the time.'

'Yes, we've lived; but also we've been near death too, and that always drives things home and sorts one's ideas for one.'

'Yes. I realised that the night before you went to the caves to kill the bear. I understood more about things then than I ever did before.'

'A night like that does clear one's brain. You get away from the frills and rubbish, and learn the real true values. And what specially did you learn, then?'

'What Mary said to-night — "Romance would be cheap at any price." Real romance, that is — the genuine kind — the kind that can face the heights and depths and not lose courage in the twilight and the shadows. Jim, it was worth coming to Baltistan to make sure of that, wasn't it?'

'To Baltistan and beyond all the "last blue mountains barred with snow" that ever were. Thank God that you and I are pilgrims, person — always have been — always will be — pilgrims to the end.'

'And after, too,' said she, taking up — as ever — my unspoken thought.

THE END

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